

We are Loved

Barth story

- One of the best known theologians of the last century was Karl Barth
 - Swiss/German background, born towards end of 1800s, died the year I was born, 1968;
 - rediscovered the power and centrality of the Scriptures following liberal re-interpretations;
 - taught in Germany before the war where he became involved in opposing Hitler; eventually had to flee to his native Switzerland;
 - still a towering figure for anyone studying systematic theology;
- Near the end of his life Barth was giving a lecture tour in the United States:
 - came to University of Chicago Divinity School; gave his lecture to packed lecture hall - rather like William Barclay, I suppose...
 - at the end of the lecture the president of the divinity school told the audience that Dr Barth was not well and was very tired, and though he thought Dr Barth would like to be open for questions, he probably could not handle the strain. Then he said, "Therefore, I'll ask just one question on behalf of us all.... Dr Barth, of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider to be the greatest of them all?"
 - remarkable question to ask someone who has written literally tens of thousands of pages of some of the most sophisticated theology ever put on paper! **All those present sat with notebooks and pens ready** - wanted to jot down the premier insight of this great theologian...
 - *Karl Barth closed his eyes and thought for a moment; then he smiled, opened his eyes and said: "The greatest theological insight I have ever had is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!"*

Malachi Background and getting going

- Its that truth that forms the starting point for all that Malachi has to say:
 - *"I have loved you," says the LORD (v2)*
- In some ways a surprising way to start:
 - Malachi was one of the last prophets to write in the OT;
 - after David's kingship, kingdom split.... first Northern Kingdom, then Southern Kingdom were carried off into exile... but God was gracious and brought back a remnant, who rebuilt the Temple (Ezra) and the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah);
 - *Malachi spoke into this period of restoration, when life wasn't easy;*
 - and *following God didn't seem a good option* - the wicked appeared to prosper, real hardship was never far away, so what point was there in following an apparently distant God?
- Malachi comes to bring God's response to the people's criticisms:
 - *God says, through Malachi, you guys are at fault here, not me - look at your unfaithfulness!!*
 - God asks some hard, painful questions of the people - questions we too will face as we read this book on and off between now and the end of September
- **But God starts with this reminder of his love**
- God says:
 - *"I'm not just saying this stuff to get at you - I love you, I have your best interests at heart. You don't deserve my love - I just chose you, chose to shower you with my love. Not for anything you've done; just because!"*
(see vs. 2b-3)
- So all the way through this book, as we hear the hard questions asked, as we ask them of ourselves, we need always to remember this over-riding context: **God loves us!!**

God deserves our respect

- Things never seem to stay the same
- A couple of years back was the Queen's Jubilee - 50 years on throne

- a lot of column inches were generated then comparing the world of today with the world of the Coronation in 1952, or of the Silver Jubilee in 1977...
- **for instance:** the way that respect is given has changed, the way that honour is paid;
- **1952** - far off figure, great deference, little knowledge;
- **2002** - less remote, less deference, more respect for achievement rather than position - remember Charles at the concert in the Buckingham Palace Gardens: "Your majesty..... mummy!"
- Teenagers today are often given a bad name of not respecting anything!
 - while some truth in that, its not the full story...
 - many teenagers give respect in the way that they emulate their idols - they perhaps don't respect the things or people their parents might want them to, but they can be prepared to go to great lengths to be like their hero, or to go and see them - football matches, concerts, looks, "kit", even piercings!!
- More than the Queen, more than any hero, God is worthy of our honour, our ultimate respect
 - not only did he create us, not only is he a holy, powerful, awesome God, he also loves us and gave himself for us;
 - God is worthy of our worship
- The people of Malachi's time knew that - with their heads
 - but they didn't really live as if it were true!
- In that day it would have been unthinkable for a son not to show due respect, due deference to his father, or a servant to his master
- Yet that is exactly what God says his people were doing
 - *"If I am a father, where is the honor due me?"* (v.6)

Giving our best... or second best?

Gorilla Story

- Anyone here who has ever lost their job might identify with this story:
 - A man lost his job. He was so depressed that he couldn't go home and tell his family what had happened. Instead he took a long walk in the park and found a bench where he could sit and bemoan his sad fate
 - After a while another man, equally depressed, came along and sat at the other end of the same bench. He looked over and saw the first man with his head in his hands, groaning to himself, and couldn't help asking, "What's wrong with you?"
 - First man said, "I've lost my job. I can't go home and tell my family what has happened. They depend on me, and I won't be able to be the good provider I've always been. What's your problem?"
 - Second man replied, "I run a circus and the main attraction has been a huge threatening gorilla. People came from all over to watch that gorilla rant and rave at them. Two days ago the gorilla died, and I know my circus won't be able to survive the loss."
 - "Hey", said the first man, "You need a gorilla and I need a job. I've got an idea - why don't we skin the gorilla, dress me up in its skin and let me take a try at pretending. We've got nothing to lose - how about it?"
 - So they agreed, and the deed was done. In the days that followed the first man dressed in the gorilla's skin and raged more than the real gorilla ever had. His antics were such that the crowds coming to the circus grew larger and larger, and both men were making a fortune
 - Then one day, by sheer accident, a lion ended up in the same cage with the phony gorilla. The crowds gathered to see this incredible confrontation. The lion and the gorilla circled each other as the people waited to see what would happen
 - Finally, the gorilla realised he was cornered and that there was no escape, and he yelled at the top of his lungs, "HELP!!"
 - The lion shouted back, "Shut up! You're not the only one out of a job!"

Conclusion

- Sooner or later our pretences are always stripped away and we are exposed for who we really are
- So it was for the people Malachi was speaking to:
 - they had the outward appearance of worship, the sacrifices and so on, but God saw the reality
 - they were getting by on the bare minimum; they were giving second best to God, blemished sheep and not the perfect ones (a) they'd promised, and (b) God's law demanded
 - worship had become a duty, a burden - "how tired we are of all this" (v13)
- There are times when we are in danger of taking the same attitude - I know I do it sometimes:
 - is being here for worship a mere duty, a mere habit? Or are we here to meet God?
 - we can't be perfect - but we can seek to come with the expectation that we will meet God, worship him, hear from him;
 - we will make mistakes - but we can endeavour always to give our best to God, not our second best
- Jesus loves me this I know...

We are here to praise You,
lift our hearts and sing;
We are here to give You
the best that we can bring.
And it is our love
rising from our hearts-
Everything within us cries:
'Abba Father!'
Help us now to give You
pleasure and delight-
heart and mind and will that say:
'I love You Lord.'