

Introduction

Various Athletics Championships...

- Are you a fan of **athletics**: the World Athletics Championships, or the Olympics?
 - do you stay up to all hours to see your favourite events live when they are happening at a funny time on the other side of the world?
 - and after any given championship there'll be **favourite moments...**
 - **Kelly Holmes** double gold in Athens?
 - GB team winning gold in the mens **100m sprint relay**?
 - or, going back a few years, **Jonathan Edwards** jumping 18.29m in 1995 for the world record?
- One incident struck me - I think it was during a World Athletics Championships sometime ago:
 - during **women's pole vault...**
 - contender, can't remember where she was in the competition, whether it was early qualifying stages, or vying for a medal...
 - gets set for jump; wee routine; runs down runway with great big pole (how do they do that?!); vaults up... up... **doesn't make it over**; bar crashes down!
 - **camera catches her looking over to the stand as she walks away... where her coach is watching.** He has spotted something in her technique that she is not quite getting right; he tells her (**gestures!**), she nods, and heads back to the end of the runway, preparing for her next attempt.
 - at the next attempt, **glances back over to her coach**, as if to confirm his instructions, runs, and **this time goes over!**
- **She listened to the advice she was given - and, it would seem, acted on it!**
 - didn't just hear and ignore - that would have been daft!
 - she listened, and she acted on what she heard.

Hear and Act

- This simple lesson is one God needed to teach his people in Malachi's day.
 - looking not just for a surface acceptance, but a real change of heart as they listened to what he had to say to them.
- Malachi's first challenge is for the priests:
 - meant to provide leadership, in all spheres of life;
 - most of all direct, draw and show people to God;
 - God's challenge is that they are not living up to that call;
 - indeed, they are doing the opposite: **"by your teaching have caused many to stumble"** (v.8)
- To emphasise his point, to make clear the validity of his charge, **God through Malachi draws a comparison with the first ever priest in Israel's history: Levi....**
 - Levi revered God (v.5) the priests of Malachi's day did not (v.9 - **not followed my ways**);
 - Levi taught rightly, from what God had said (v.6a) ... the priests of Malachi's day did not (v.8);
 - Levi walked close to God, had a living relationship with him and an upright character (v.6b) the priests of Malachi's day did not (v.8a);
- There is a challenge to all Christian leadership here:
 - to not just be doing things, running a good show; but **to have a living and vital relationship with God ourselves, to be leading from Scriptures and not with our own ideas, and to be people of integrity.**
 - all of us are, to some extent **"leaders"** - those looked to by others for a lead - parents? peer groups? even other new Christians in congregation?
 - follow-on from that is the **necessity for all of us to support one another in prayer**, to pray for godliness, not merely for "success".
- **Hear and Act** - relationship with God, not just outward success?

Faithful and True?

- Very similar challenge comes to the people too, not just the leaders.
 - for though in some ways higher standards are expected of those in recognised positions of leadership, **Scripture really calls us ALL to follow Christ as closely as anyone else**
- God's question to his people was "**Are you LIVING faithfully to your CALLING?**"
 - they were God's chosen people, sole recipients of divine self-revelation!
 - **were they living up to their identity as members of God's family?**

Story

- Story Nicky Gumbel tells on Alpha course - bag lady near his church, who he knew of; very difficult person to get on with; she died, and he ended up taking her funeral.
 - turned out she was rich; had inherited great wealth; but didn't/couldn't give up her life on the street.
 - **she was rich - but she wasn't living as if she was!**
- This is essentially God's complaint against his people:
 - **you are my people, but you are not living like you are!**

Marriage & Divorce

- In particular, they were treating marriage lightly, in two ways:
 - 1. marrying outside the Jewish faith;
 - 2. accepting divorce as normal, as OK, rather than exceptional and terrible
- This is a hard area to tackle - pastorally, I'm aware of the sensitivities this has for people:
 - whether **themselves separated or divorced...**
 - or maybe with **children whose relationships have broken down...**
 - or possibly folk whose **partner does not share the same faith they hold dear...**
- I suppose the only thing we can try to do is follow Jesus' example in setting the highest of standards and at the same time showing the greatest compassion.
- In Malachi's day there were quite clear lines between Jews and non-Jews, even though at the time he was writing they shared the same land and would have lived close to each other, traded with each other.
 - and God's law was quite clear in banning marriages outside of the faith - **for the Jew it was a conscious choice to go into the path of disobedience and temptation...** how will the kids be brought up, what happens when the partner wants to worship idols...
 - *(our situation is a bit different - people got married before they come to faith; or perhaps a partner has slipped away from faith over the years - we'll come in a second to what our response should be)*
 - similarly God's law was quite clear in not condoning divorce: while it was not completely banned, there were only very limited situations in which it was permitted; God knows that things can go terribly wrong!
 - but the point here is that **that permission**, that let out clause, **should not be abused** to lightly let go of relationships;
 - we can't just take up with and then let go of people as we please;
 - God hates the pain left behind and the selfishness so often characteristic of such an attitude
- **God's call to his people was to live up to their identity, his people.**
 - **but they weren't** - in particular in the area of their marriage relationships.

Conclusion

- The response God is looking for from us, whether in our marriage relationships or in any other aspect of our lives where he has called us to be faithful, is found in the middle of v.15:
 - "So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth."
- Guard yourself in your spirit, do not break faith...
- Keep a hold of your first love, don't get out of touch with God.
- At any decision point - and we are making decisions every day:
 - ASK - "How will this affect my relationship with God? Will doing this, going in this direction, making this choice, spending time with this person, spending time watching this TV show make it easier or harder to live for God? Will it bring me closer to him or drive me further away?"
 - and ACT - don't just listen to what the answer to that question is, but act upon it!
- If we do that we will live in step with a God who is gracious to those who have been broken and hurt by relationships that have broken down. If we learn to walk humbly and faithfully with our God, acting as well as listening, then we will become more like the church in this final story:
 - *A young minister was serving in his first church; still at the first few times of doing things.... There was a young woman who came to his church and presented her child for baptism, a child that had been born outside of marriage - a few years ago, in a small rural community... a woman like that could find herself shunned. On the day of the baptism the woman stood alone before the congregation, holding the child in her arms. That young pastor hadn't realised the awkwardness of the situation. He came to the part when the questions are asked; one of them went like this: "Who stands with this child to assure the commitments and promises herewith made will be carried out? Who will be there for this child in times of need and assure that this child is brought up in the admonition of the Lord?" It was only then that the pastor realised there were no God-parents to take those promises (not Scotland, no God parents here!). There was a pause... But after only a brief second, as though on cue, the entire congregation stood, unprompted, and with one voice said "We will!".*
- That was a congregation that had begun to learn to listen to what God had to say to them - and respond with grace and faith.
 - the proof would have been in the years to come... but they'd started well!
 - pray God we'd learn to the same.