

Christmas is coming again - But what's it all about?

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Date: 11 December 2016

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] But we begin our new Christmas series this morning, and we're going to turn to our Bibles now to the prophet Malachi, the very last little book of the Old Testament. You'll find that, I think, on page 802 if you have one of our blue visitor's Bibles.

And we're going to read together some words from the prophet Malachi at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3. And then after that, we're going to turn over a few pages to the beginning of the New Testament, to Matthew's Gospel, and we're going to read a little bit there as well.

So Malachi, who's the last prophet of the Old Testament, who prophesied around about the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Nobody's absolutely sure. He could have been a contemporary of theirs or just slightly afterwards, but certainly it's that period that we've been immersed in for quite a long time in our Sunday services.

420, 430, sometime like that, B.C., before the coming of the Lord Jesus. It's some four centuries or so. And he's the last writing prophet of the old era, before the very last of the prophets, John the Baptist, came and actually announced and pointed to the coming of the Lord Jesus himself.

So we're going to read about both of those this morning. Chapter 2, verse 17 of Malachi. The prophet says from the Lord to the people, You have wearied the Lord with your words.

[1 : 32] But you say, how have we wearied him? By saying, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them. Or by asking, where is the God of justice?

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, Behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like a fuller's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi, and refine them like gold and silver.

And they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years.

[2 : 39] Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker and his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

Now turn over with me just a few pages. I think it's page 808 in the Blue Bibles, to Matthew's Gospel at chapter 3. And here we are, some 400 and some years later.

In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, when he said, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather belt around his waist. And his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region about the Jordan, were going out to him.

And they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, you brood of vipers, snakes, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.

[4 : 10] Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit, is cut down and thrown into the fire.

I baptize you with water for repentance. But he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn. But the chaff, he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, if you take up your Bibles and turn to the prophet Malachi at the passage you read there, chapter 3, page 802 in the blue church Bibles, if you have one of those.

[5 : 40] Today's the third Sunday of Advent, which means that Christmas is coming again. And soon, of course, the day itself will be here. But what does it mean?

What does Christmas mean? What does X-mas mean? Perhaps this year we should call it Brexmas. That's what everything seems to have a bricks in front of it these days.

What does Brexmas mean in Britain today? I wonder if you saw the rather brilliant cartoon by Matt in the Telegraph this week somebody sent to me.

It's a picture of the man and his wife putting up their Christmas tree and the one says to the other, I'm for a hard Brexmas. No sending money, no trading gifts, and definitely no free movement of relatives.

I thought that was terrific. Well, what is Brexmas about? What is Christmas about in Britain today? Well, of course, it's about presents and decorations and feasting and family and plenty of tills ringing aplenty if Buchanan Street yesterday afternoon was anything to go by.

[6 : 47] Certainly the shops are hoping for that. It is about all of these things, and we don't want to be churlish and dampen the celebration side of Christmas. Nobody loves a Scrooge.

We don't want to do that. But of course, we must say, mustn't we, as Christians, that Christmas is about much, much more. Much more than just a cheery midwinter festival to cheer us up in the cold and darkness of December.

I take it that you're here in church this morning because you realize that. Or at least because you're interested enough to explore the real point of the Christmas message.

I take it that you know that Christmas is really about Jesus of Nazareth, the one that they called the Christ. But what is it about Jesus?

That's the question, isn't it? No doubt this year, as most years, there will be, I haven't looked, but I'm sure there will be, there'll be documentaries on the TV by some clever reporter like Fergal Keane or somebody like that.

[7 : 50] Documentaries giving their opinion of who the real Jesus actually was. And, you know, they'll go through all the archives and speak to clever people and all the rest of it. But the thing is, all of their views will be so varied and so different that you'll come to the end of that documentary and you'll wonder, can anyone really know what the real answer is at all?

Well, I'm not a clever BBC reporter. I can't do that. What I can do, though, is I can tell you what Jesus' own view of his coming into the world was.

And what the view of the prophets who foretold him and what the view of the apostles who preached his message was. Then you can make up your own mind, which is what all of us must do. Make up our own minds, whether these words of Jesus Christ, this wondrous person in history, whether they can be trusted and believed or whether, in fact, they're just to be put aside and rejected as all a fable, all a lot of nonsense.

And Jesus Christ said about his own birth, about his own coming into the world, that it was a coming long promised. It was a coming that was predicted by all the prophets of old.

[9 : 04] This is he whom seers in old time chanted of with one accord, as one of the carols says. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 11, Jesus says, all the prophets and the law, that's the whole Old Testament, prophesied until John the Baptist.

And he, John, is the Elijah who was to come. Now, Jesus is alluding to the passage that we read in Malachi. As I said, a prophet some 400 and so years before Jesus' birth.

He talked about a great and awesome day of the Lord that would come. And he talked of a messenger who would come and prepare the way for the Lord himself. Like another Elijah, who was one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets.

So Jesus is telling us that if you want to understand his coming into the world, the coming that was announced by John the Baptist, then you have to understand what Malachi and the other prophets said about the day of his coming.

Which Jesus himself says was all about him. So this year in our Christmas services, we're going to give our attention to the promise of Christmas. According to Malachi, the very last in line of the prophets of the Old Testament.

[10:19] We're going to focus this evening in our nine lessons and carols. And I hope you'll all come and bring friends and family. We're going to focus this evening and next Sunday morning and Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

We're going to focus particularly on the wonderful picture in Malachi chapter 4, verse 2, of what the coming of the Messiah will mean for those who fear his name, for those who long for Jesus' coming. But before we get to that verse, we really have to understand this passage that we read together from the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3, which certainly promises a coming of the Lord, but when you look at it, it doesn't seem to have much of the Christmas spirit about it, does it? If this is what the coming of Jesus is about, what the coming of Christmas is about, then what on earth is Jesus talking about? I want you to look at these verses.

Page 802. What kind of event in history did Jesus himself see his own birth and indeed his life and his death and his resurrection, did he see it as being all about?

[11:24] If it fulfills what Malachi promises here about the coming of the Lord to his temple, about the coming of the Lord to his people Israel and indeed to the people of the whole world.

Christmas is coming, but what kind of coming does the prophet Malachi predict here? And does Jesus himself affirm in his own words?

Well, I think we have to say that what Malachi foretells is first a shaking coming. A shaking coming that reveals God's absolute justice, his righteousness.

It's a coming that finally answers all man's guilty mocking of God. Why is he coming? Says chapter 2, verse 17.

He's coming because God is weary. God is weary of the inadequacy and the massive disappointment that he finds in the human race. Now, what a turnaround that is.

[12:32] People think it's the other way around, don't they? People in this world think, oh, we are weary of God. We're sick of him. And the people in Malachi's time were saying exactly that very thing.

That's what they're saying in our time. It's what they were saying in their time. It's what people all the way through the ages have said. Look at verse 17. Where is the God of justice? How can there be a God who allows so much suffering, so much injustice, so much evil in the world?

Our newspapers have been full of that this very week. Where is the justice in terrorists in Northern Ireland who have been convicted of killing sometimes scores of people being released after just two years in prison when British soldiers sent by the state to counter those terrorists face being in prison for the rest of their life?

Where is the God of justice? Where is the God of justice? Say the families who are not being allowed even to bring a private prosecution against the person who killed their relatives through negligence and reckless driving.

Where is the God of justice who allows such terrible things to be going on in Syria, in Iraq, in all of these places, in the bomb yesterday in Turkey? Where is the God of justice? How can there be a God who allows all these things in the world?

[13:55] There can't be a God at all, can there? Or if there is a God, well, he's immoral, he's awful. We don't want anything to do with that kind of God. That's what people say, isn't it?

Maybe it's what you think. It's what many people think. Another thing people still say today is also there in verse 17. Look, everyone who does evil must be good in God's eyes because it's always the villains that come out top in our world, isn't it?

Look at all these bankers who bankrupted so many of these economies in the world with all their greed, with all their folly and all their derivatives trading and all the rest of it. They didn't lose their jobs.

They still get their multi-million power bonuses. Why do the evil prosper? Why do the borrowers who constantly spend more than they have borrow themselves up to the hilt beyond the means?

Why do they get bailed out by governments who bring interest rates to rock bottom and sensible people, prudent people who have saved for their retirement get no interest now on their savings, get derisory rates on their pension annuities?

[15:04] Morality just doesn't pay, does it? It doesn't get you success in this world. So if there is a God, he must think the evil are good and the good are evil.

We can't have that kind of God. We'll throw out that kind of God. Forget about God. I'll do it my way. We'll all join Frank Sinatra. God's obviously powerless.

In fact, God will have to change his ways and his moral standards if he wants me, a modern man in the 21st century, to be a worshiper. That's what they were saying then.

That's what we're saying in our world today. Even churches seem to be saying that in our world today, don't they? The same old God, well, he's not adequate anymore for the 21st century.

No, God, you'll have to change your ways if you want to attract people into your church today. Don't be silly. Sorry, Lord. You'll have to change. Your ways just aren't acceptable anymore. Can't you see that?

[16:01] You need a makeover. You'll have to change all of those. Well, for example, all those restrictive views that you seem to have on marriage and sexuality and all of these things. You can't have that in the 21st century, God.

Where have you been? Hasn't anybody told you? And God says, verse 17, I'm weary of all this talk. So look, I am coming to earth and I'm going to have it out in a day of reckoning. My messenger will prepare the way, verse 1, but then, bang, you who are so eager to meet this God, you will find suddenly this one that you say you delight in.

He has come to answer you, to answer his critics and you will get the shock of your life when he comes. Verse 2, who can endure the day of his coming?

Why? What will he do when he comes? Malachi says he will burn like fire. He'll come burning like an oven to set them ablaze. That's what he says in the next chapter in chapter 4, verse 1.

[17:14] And those are the very words that we read, John the Baptist saying of Jesus of Nazareth 450 years later when he announced his ministry. He will baptize with fire.

He will burn with unquenchable fire. Those were his words. Look it up again if you don't believe me. It's where we get our expression, baptism of fire.

So many of our expressions that we just use so commonly. They all come from the Bible. Now that is how John described Jesus coming. And that is how Jesus, in endorsing John's words, described his own coming.

Something of a shock, isn't it? It's very plain. It is a picture unescapably of full and total judgment.

On the one hand, according to Malachi here in chapter 3, it's a painfully purifying fire of refinement to remove the dross, the impurities from silver, to remove the dirt from the woolen fleece like fuller's soap.

It's a purifying fire. But on the other hand, it is also a dreadfully punishing fire of retribution. Look at verse 5. I will draw near to you, he says, for judgment.

[18:34] Swift judgment against the sorcerers, that is those who pervert true spirituality, true religion, to make it serve themselves and not serve God. And so they cherish adultery, he says, lies, exploitation for your own gain, the poor, the marginalized, who do not fear God, who ignore God, who refuse to take God seriously at all.

Christmas is coming, says Malachi, but understand this, it will be a day of shaking, of shaking reality that will reveal the absolute righteousness, the absolute justice of God in answer to all the mockery, to all the disbelief, to all the rejection of his words and of his person by the people of this world.

Look at chapter 4, verse 1. That day is coming and it will set them ablaze. That's the Christmas that Malachi foretold.

That's what John the Baptist said about Jesus coming and that's what Jesus himself said his coming was about. This is what Jesus says in Luke's Gospel, chapter 12 and verse 49.

I came to cast fire on the earth. Do you think I've come to bring peace on earth? Of course that's what we think Jesus. That's what our Christmas cards say.

[20:01] That's what's playing on the radio all the time. Of course you've come to bring peace on earth. No, says Jesus, but rather division. Does that shock you?

Didn't you expect a Christmas service to be all about peace on earth, not about the opposite? that's the opposite in Jesus' own words and this is what he says Christmas is all about.

Well, it shocked Jesus' first hearers of course as well, very violently indeed. Let me tell you, they did not like what they heard from him and of course that's why they ended up murdering him. But that is the united testimony of the prophets, of John and of Jesus himself. Christmas is all about the promise of a shaking coming of God to this earth to reveal his absolute justice, his righteousness to the world.

And therefore it means he must bestow his ultimate just judgment on a world that has mocked his ways, that has rejected his rule, that has turned its back on his face.

[21 : 20] And that's what Christmas is all about according to the prophets of the Bible and according to Jesus himself. But it's not all that Christmas is about.

Please don't leave at this point. There is something more to be said, something of overwhelming importance, but despite everything we've said about Christmas, and we can't avoid that because it is the truth of God told by every prophet and by Jesus himself.

Despite all of that, nevertheless, Christmas does strike for us also the hour of God's grace, not just his judgment.

Because he who comes as promised as a refiner's fire is also the one who comes with redeeming love. I want us to pause for a moment as we let that sink in.

And we're going to sing the carol on the screen that reminds us of the angel's message about Christmas, that it is true that Christ, the Redeemer, is here, that a Savior is born.

[22 : 35] Still the night. D apostles' d Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Please take your Bibles one more time and turn again to Malachi chapter 3 and 4 and page 802. We must see that the promise of Christmas that Malachi and the other prophets gave is, without question, a day of fiery judgment that will punish all evil.

And will punish all scorn and all mockery of God. And because of that, and only because of that, and only through that judgment on evil will it be able to usher in a true and lasting peace into this world.

[26 : 11] So that this world is made new and made right forever. But on that day, you see, friends, on that day, it will be too late for all who have mocked their God and their Savior.

They will not be able to endure the day of his coming. They will not be able to endure his judgment. They will be stubble, says the prophet and John and Jesus. Jesus is very clear about that. For there must be justice if God is going to be the just judge.

He must punish evil. He must punish the wicked. Any judge in our courts who didn't do that after a verdict of guilty would be run out into the street.

And rightly so. But you see, this is why Christmas really is great good news. Because what the angels announced is that the coming of the Lord Jesus would first of all, first of all, not be that shaking coming to reveal God's absolute justice, his righteousness forever.

[27 : 22] But first of all, it would be a wonderful saving coming to reveal God's abundant mercy. Look at chapter 4 and verse 5.

At the very end of Malachi's prophecy, God says that he will send Elijah the prophet before that great and awesome day of the Lord to turn people's hearts back to God again.

To call them to repent. To turn around. And therefore to avoid that coming fire of judgment. And he does that because he is a God of abundant grace and mercy.

And so the John the Baptist who was the promised Elijah, he came. And that was exactly his message. Repent. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

You must repent. That was Jesus' message. His first words. Repent. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Notice Jesus did not say to the world, God is a God of love.

[28 : 26] Everything is fine. Keep on doing what you're doing. Keep on doing as you please. God will never judge anybody. He's a God of love. No, Jesus did not say that.

Not ever. Not anywhere. What he said was, the kingdom of God's righteousness is coming. And that means that God's judgment is coming.

And his fire is coming. To cleanse this earth of its evil. But because he is a God of love, I have come now.

In a day of mercy. I have come to call you to turn back. To come back to him and so be saved. On that day of calamity. Jesus came to proclaim God's great mercy.

To call people to receive that mercy by following him. By trusting in him. And he could only do that because he came to win mercy for his people.

[29 : 27] To take upon himself the punishment for their mockery. For their scorn of God. So that we might be forgiven for our scorn.

For our mocking. So that we might be brought near to him who so loved us that he bore in his own person. In God the Son. That he bore the punishment that should have been ours.

Jesus Christ faced the blazing fire of God's judgment himself. So that we might sing as we've just done. Christ the Redeemer is here. So that we might know that love is still smiling from his face to the people of this world.

That it strikes for us. Now still the hour of grace because a Savior is born. Because his coming long promised was first a saving coming to reveal God's abundant mercy to all in this world.

Before that great and awesome day of the Lord. Before the risen Lord Jesus Christ returns. As he shall return to judge this whole earth and everyone in it.

[30 : 40] Everyone who has ever lived. Judge it with perfect righteousness. Overcoming all his enemies. And enforcing from that day with power and majesty and might.

Enforcing the King's peace. Friends, that is the true message of Christmas. That's what the prophets promised. That's what John the Baptist announced.

That's what Jesus confirmed and proclaimed. Christmas has come in part. The promise has been fulfilled in the dawning of the day of grace. But it's yet to be fully and finally realized.

Christmas is coming again because Jesus is coming again. In all his glory. And he will be the Lord and the judge of all this earth. But who?

Who will endure the day of that coming? Look at Malachi's words again in chapter 4 verses 1 and 2.

There will be, he says, a blaze of fiery judgment for all the arrogant, for all the evildoers.

[31 : 50] But, verse 2, a wonderfully different picture of joyous salvation for those who fear his name. All through Malachi's prophecy, there's a great distinction made between those who despise God's name, who willfully ignore him, his words, his ways, and those who, as chapter 3, verse 16 puts it, who have feared the Lord and esteemed his name.

They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts. Verse 17. And I will spare them as a man spares his son. And then you will see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked.

Between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve him. Do you see that distinction? What is it that makes you righteous? What is it that makes you wicked? It is not, according to the Bible, it is not your innate, personal, moral qualities.

But it is all about whether you have acknowledged and bowed down to serve the one true God of earth and heaven. Whether you feared and esteemed his name.

Or whether by ignoring him. Ignoring his words and his commands. You've despised his name.

Shone contempt for him. Hated him. But to do that, to do that is utter, utter disaster.

[33 : 28] Malachi is clear. Read his whole oracle. Read his whole book later on. Chapter 1, he says this, from the rising of the sun to its setting. My name will be great in the heavens, says the Lord of hosts.

I am a great king and my name will be feared among the nations. In chapter 2, if you will not listen, if you will not take to heart and give honor to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I shall send the curse upon you.

But for you who fear my name, chapter 4, verse 2, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.

Do you see that? The distinction could not possibly be clearer, could it? And of course, the New Testament could not be clearer. Because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, he came.

He was the great Redeemer. He left the glory of heaven to humble himself, to come to this earth, to take our flesh, to walk the way of pain, to die the death of a criminal on the cross and to bear the eternal punishment for our sins.

[34 : 47] And because of that, says the Apostle Paul, God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father.

Who shall endure the day of his coming in glory? Only those who have esteemed his name, the name above every name, the name of the Lord Jesus.

Only those who have bowed to Jesus Christ as Lord and God. Only those who have responded now to him in the hour of God's grace and mercy.

Only those who have responded now to Jesus the Savior will be able to stand on that day before Jesus the judge. Only those who have been cleansed, who have been forgiven, who have been refined in his purifying fire from the dross, from the impurity of their sins, from their resistance to God, their mockery of their God and Creator.

that mockery that lies so deep in every human heart. Malachi 4, verses 1 and 2 are absolutely clear. [36 : 19] For those who will not have his forgiveness, for you, if you will not welcome his mercy in the hour of grace, alas, you must face the fire of his judgment when that day comes.

And that day, my friends, will surely come. The God of earth and heaven will show himself to be utterly just. He will not leave evil unpunished.

He will not cover over on that day the sins of the unrepentant. Why would anyone resist the day of his grace?

Why would anyone refuse the messengers of his mercy come from heaven? At the first Christmas, God the Son himself came down from heaven to show his abundant mercy to those who were his enemies, to work a great salvation even for those who hated him, for all who will turn and love him and honor his name.

He came as the great redeemer. And this Christmas still he comes to call, to call all who will listen.

[37 : 41] He's still saying, come, come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, come to me and I will give you rest forever. So I'm saying to you this Christmas, don't resist his call.

Don't resist his mercy and his love. Don't insist on the blazing fire of his wrath when he offers you the beautifying fire of his love.

Come, as we'll sing in a moment, with awe, with joy, with faith, with love, come to Jesus our Savior, Son of God made man.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. If you follow