

THE SINS OF HALF-HEARTEDNESS
(Malachi)
a series of addresses given at the first Word Alive-Spring Harvest (1993)

1. DOUBT (Malachi 1:1-5)

We knocked on the door and went in. The mother burst into tears almost immediately and pointed to the little cot in the corner. We knew already that it was her first baby, for whom she and her husband had been praying for many months. The child had been born handicapped. Between sobs the mother blurted out the question: 'Does God care?'

It is the question we always ask when any kind of tragedy strikes. It was the question that Jews had been asking for a couple of centuries, long before Malachi had arrived on the scene. They had had so long to grieve that now they no longer expressed their doubt about God's care through tears, but with a sarcastic curl of the lips and a wearied shrug of the shoulders. "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'" (Mal 1:2)

Almost everybody who has ever tried their hand at open-air preaching has encountered the heckler; the person who shouts from the audience in an attempt to throw you off your stroke or embarrass you. Martin Luther probably delivered the best response to such an interruption. A trouble-maker demanded loudly, 'Well, what was God doing before he made the world then?' Luther, quoting his theological mentor Augustine, is reputed to have replied: 'Making hell for people who ask stupid questions like that!'

If you have ever faced that kind of hostile questioning, you will have plenty of sympathy for Malachi, for it seems that there were plenty of hecklers disturbing his attempt at public speaking too. Every time he makes a statement throughout the course of these four chapters, some sarcastic or dismissive retort is thrown back at him from his audience.

Here is the first example. 'I have loved you,' says the Lord. 'But you ask, "How? You don't expect us to believe that!"'

Another example: 'You have despised God's name,' says Malachi. 'Prove it!' shouts back the wise-cracker (cf. 1:6).

Again in chapter 2: 'You have wearied the Lord,' he says. 'Pull the other leg, Malachi,' comes the riposte (cf. 2:17).

'You are robbing God,' he asserts. 'Stuff and nonsense,' they reply (cf. 3:8).

Some commentators regard this heckling dialogue merely as a literary device to express the unresponsiveness of Malachi's contemporaries. But to me it sounds far more like authentic, live reporting.

Imagine, then, Malachi preaching his open-air sermon in the Jerusalem market place. But his hearers are giving him a rough ride. It is quite clear that the Jews to whom he is speaking do not feel they deserve his prophetic rebukes.

'What right has this fellow to criticise us?' they say. 'We are not irreligious — why, if anyone deserves to be put into the dock, it is God. Considering all we have done for him, he has done very little for us. He just does not care!'

And superficially perhaps they had grounds for their indignation. For Malachi's hearers are not faithless apostates. There had been a time a few centuries earlier when prophets like Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah had had very good grounds for their pulpit invective. For Baal worship was corrupting the people then.

But now all that was past history. These Jews to whom Malachi speaks are not like that anymore. God had punished the Jews for all their previous idolatry. He had sent them into Babylonian exile for seventy years and, to a considerable extent, that had had the desired effect. They have learned the folly of their idolatrous ways; they have come to appreciate their national heritage and want to preserve it. Indeed, so committed are they to their Jewish culture and their Jewish religion now that this particular group of Jews had actually sacrificed what for many of them would have been quite a comfortable and prosperous existence in Babylon. They had returned to Judah to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and to reoccupy the city and reconstruct its ruined walls. You can read the whole story in books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Of course, it did not all happen in a few days. Malachi is preaching his sermon some ninety or hundred years after the first group of Jews had returned to Jerusalem from their exile, By now the rebuilding of the city is complete. In fact we are told in Nehemiah 8-10 (which is useful background material to Malachi) that when the reconstruction of the walls, the temple and everything was complete, Ezra the scribe read the law of God (probably to these very Jews, or at least to their parents). And they were brought to tears by the reading of God's Word. They collectively confessed their earlier sins and made a solemn promise in writing, signed by all their leaders, that in future they would be true to the covenant that God had made with Israel. There would be no more compromise with paganism; no more disobeying the Ten Commandments, no more neglect of God's temple. From now on they were going to do right what their forefathers had conspicuously failed to do right.

And their promise had not been without effect; there were no more altars to Baal among them, no more cult prostitutes to Ashtaroath, no more child sacrifices to Moloch. All these abominations were past. The temple of Jehovah was once again the religious centre of the Jewish community. No one would have dreamed of abandoning that temple now. They had rebuilt it with their own bare hands.

And yet, in spite of all their piety, Malachi is not satisfied. With the insight of a prophet, he can detect a new form of spiritual failure in the people. Not the sort of gross and obvious apostasy that had characterised the pre-exilic period, but a subtle invasive weed but growing up in the middle of God's vineyard nevertheless; a weed that could grow and blossom even in the midst of their apparent orthodoxy.

In these four morning studies we are going to identify some of the symptoms of that malaise. Tomorrow, in 1:6 - 2:9, we shall hear Malachi bemoaning the *apathy* the people displayed in regard to public worship; they attended the temple, but they made sure their religion did not cost them too much. One gets the distinct impression that for many of them, public worship had become a tedious and mechanical routine. And to make matters worse, the clergy were encouraging them in this lukewarm, lackadaisical attitude.

Next, in 2:10-16, we shall find Malachi addressing the *infidelity* of the people in their domestic lives. Not necessarily the sort of infidelity that issues in adulterous relationships, though there may have been some instances of that. No, these Jews simply did not demonstrate any spiritual commitment to God in their family life. They went to the temple, but that was where it ended. So, for example, they were not bothered about the religious affiliation of their marital partners. 'My wife is a pagan — so what? Everyone will get to heaven in the end. You've got to live and let live. It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere.'

Doubly disturbing for Malachi was the fact that the divorce rate was also escalating. People were dumping their marital partners in the way you might dump an old car to make way for a newer, more attractive model. In neither these areas - choosing a pagan partner or abandoning existing partner - were the people of God showing the least sensitivity to what God thought about their behaviour

Then finally, in 2:17 - 4:6, we shall see Malachi putting his finger on the prevailing *cynicism* of their general moral behaviour. They were becoming sceptical about the sceptical about the whole business of right and wrong.

'Look,' they were saying, 'people get away with murder in this world. It's all very well for old-fashioned preachers like Malachi to waffle all that theology about God's justice - but let's face it - God has created a thoroughly unjust world. There's no profit-margin in goodness. Look at us; we have left our homes in Babylon, cashed in our life savings, come back here to Jerusalem to work on a building site, and why? Because prophets like Malachi told us God was going to renew the old kingdom of David in all its glory, that's why! And what have we got for all our pain? We've got a third-rate temple that would make us a laughing stock if we'd built it in Babylon; we've got a jerry-built city wall that would have a hard job keeping out a troop of Boy Scouts, and we've got empty stomachs half the time. The economy is not picking up. The dream just hasn't materialised. The kingdom of David hasn't arrived. We are still political pawns of the Persian Empire. We have no real freedom; the wealth and the power lie in the hands of our enemies - pagan enemies, who couldn't care less about Jehovah, the God of Israel. Yet they're the ones with money in their pockets! A God of justice? Don't make me laugh! "Do others before they do you," that's the moral philosophy that works!'

Let me repeat; these are not blatant unbelievers with whom Malachi is dealing. They are church-goers, people who pride themselves on their religion. This is the seed-bed from which the Judaism we meet 400 years later in the time of Jesus was to sprout. These are not idolaters. If anything, they are incipient Pharisees. Yet there is apathy in their public worship, infidelity in their domestic relationships, and cynicism in their moral attitudes.

Such attitudes, I suggest, are far from uncommon among the people of God. In fact, they are typical second-generation temptations. In the early days of any movement of spiritual renewal among God's people the danger is always fanaticism; zeal can all too easily be perverted into error as people go over the top in their new-found spiritual enthusiasm; and heresies, cults and sectarian divisions are often the result. But once the first flush of that early excitement dies away and the battle for theological orthodoxy has been won, then a new danger starts to emerge: the 'second-generation' temptation to complacency, to compromise, to worldliness, to indifference.

You can see that story repeated over and over again. Every new denomination that has emerged in church history was, in its infancy, an attempt – often a laudable and necessary one

– to rediscover the enthusiasm, purity and commitment of the apostolic age. They read the book of Acts, they looked at the church around, and said, 'It is not like that any longer; we must make it like that.' And every denomination, in the wake of that early pristine devotion, has discovered the perils of second-generation half-heartedness, Disillusionment sets in, our fond dreams do not materialise, our triumphalism is drowned by the icy water of realism. And, just like Malachi's audience, we start to doubt as a result.

That was the root of their spiritual malaise: doubt. Not the sort of doubt that questions the existence of God, but the sort of doubt that questions whether it is really worth worshipping him; that questions what profit there is in being a Christian, with all the effort it involves; that questions whether the Bible really does bring blessing to those who obey it; that questions whether God cares in the least for those whom he calls his people. And there are many among evangelical Christians today who walk the same dangerous path.

In the earlier part of this century it was the battle for truth that was critical. The inspiration of Scripture, the atoning significance of the cross, the deity of Jesus - those were the cardinal issues. But for most evangelicals those battles are now fought and won. We are committed to an orthodox confession of faith. Most of us are embedded in a theological tradition that in its biblicism cannot be faulted. And yet, like these post-exilic Jews, we can still make the cardinal mistake of resting on our laurels.

For some of us, I suspect, the passion of our spiritual youth has decayed into mid-life spiritual inertia. It shows perhaps in our attitude to worship, as it did among Israelites. We go to church, but once a week on a Sunday morning is quite enough with a schedule like ours. We sometimes take a look at our Bibles, but habits of personal prayer and Bible study have become undisciplined – when was the last time we spent much time with God on our own? And though we still manage to show a certain amount of emotional engagement in our choruses and our songs, while we are worshipping together in public, maybe the words 'What a burden it all is!' sometimes hover, if not on our lips, then at the back of our minds.

It shows too in our attitude to family life. 'What does it matter if I go out with a non-Christian?' says the Christian Union member. 'So my wife and I are getting divorced - what does it matter? It's not the unforgivable sin, is it?' says the church member.

It shows, perhaps most of all, in our attitude to moral action generally. Evangelical preachers of an earlier generation used to talk a great deal about 'holiness', about the need for a thorough moral repentance in our lives. They preached the law as well as the gospel. They preached the need for church discipline as well as church growth. They wanted to see people sanctified as well as justified, disciplined as well as converted.

But today I detect a cosier and less disturbing spirit abroad in our evangelical churches, one more at ease with the values of the secular world. It is a spirit that wants to identify with evangelical Christianity, but lacks the whole-hearted commitment that authentic biblical faith demands of those who would profess it. In short, I detect doubt.

It's not the sort of doubt that denies the creed – we can be vitriolic about liberal bishops who question Christ's bodily resurrection when we want to be – but the sort of doubt that is unwilling to give one hundred per cent. It's not the doubt of the atheist, but that of the nominal Christian; that questions not whether it is true, but it is important; not whether God exists, but Whether he is really worth the effort - whether, at the end of the day, faith makes a difference.

What then is the answer to this insidious, second-generation half-heartedness? How do you restore enthusiasm and motivation in spiritual things to people who have grown weary and disillusioned in their profession of faith?

The temptation, I suppose, is to address the symptoms. You can counter apathy by whipping up more emotion in public worship, by putting a stronger beat in the choruses perhaps. You can counter the infidelity in domestic life by getting someone to publish a good book on sex and marriage. You can counter the rise in divorce rates by getting some Christian pressure group organised to campaign for stricter divorce laws and so forth. You can counter the moral cynicism of the church by carting everybody off to Keswick or to Spring Harvest, for some good holiness teaching. Best of all, of course, organise a mission! If you cannot have piety, you can at least have plenty of evangelistic activity in the church.

Malachi certainly does deal with a number of specific symptoms, as we shall be seeing in subsequent studies. But what I want you to notice this: *that is not where he begins*. His response to the compromise and the complacency of God's people is far more radical than merely to address the outward symptoms of failure. In the opening verses he goes to the root of the problem, the root of the doubt that was feeding their lack of commitment.

God's special love

'I have loved you,' says the Lord. (Mal 1:2)

I want you to notice that Malachi is not talking here about God's general love for all people. He is speaking about God's special love for his own people: 'I have loved *you*, my chosen people.' For the root of their complacency, their indifference, infidelity, cynicism and apathy, lay in the fact that they did not really believe that God did love them or even care about them. Their adversities had destroyed their assurance of God's personal commitment to them. So Malachi sees his first task as a prophet to be that of reassuring them of the indestructible covenant love of God.

'I have loved you,' says the Lord. 'But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother? the Lord says. 'Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.' (Mal 1:2-3)

We have already observed that the recent history of the Jews had been traumatic. Their homeland had been devastated by the Babylonian invasion. The temple had been destroyed. Most of the population had been exiled. It had been a crippling blow to their national pride.

And their sense of humiliation had not been eased by the fact that their neighbour, Edom, had not suffered the same fate. In fact, as the little book of Obadiah tells us, the Edomites had derived considerable *schadenfreude* from Israel's catastrophe, and had exploited her military weakness to settle some old scores. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin, and there had been bad blood between their two tribes ever since the early days when Jacob had cheated his older brother out of their father Isaac's blessing. So as far the Edomites were concerned, when Babylonian army stormed Jerusalem the Israelites were finally getting what they deserved. They were elated at the prospect of Israel's economic and political misery and they did everything they could to rub salt into the wound.

For the Jews, of course, that simply added insult to injury. How could God - their God - the God of Jacob, stand idly by and let the sons of Esau gloat over their misfortunes? It was a cruel and treacherous stab in the back! How could they go on believing that the covenant God was faithful to them?

And yet Malachi insists that God is faithful, and that they can and they must believe in his faithfulness. If only they would open their eyes to the working of his providence, they would realise how much he loved them. After all, just look at what has happened to Edom now!

'Esau I have hated. I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals,'

This is a reference to what happened in the century following the Babylonian conquest. Though Edom escaped punitive treatment, another very aggressive people had in due course overrun Edomite territory; and now Edom was in a far worse condition than Israel. The Israelites had been invited by the Persian emperor to return to their homeland and reoccupy it; but no such decree had been made for the Edomites. On the contrary, their land was a ruin. No national resurrection was scheduled for them.

Edom may say, 'Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.' But this is what the Lord Almighty says, 'They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord. You will see it with your own eyes and say, "Great is the Lord - even beyond the borders of Israel!" ' (Mal 1:4-5)

Malachi, then, insists that the Jews were doubting God's special love for them only because they were looking at events in the short term. If they wanted to understand what was happening to them they must remove the myopic distorting lenses from their eyes and see God's purpose through long-distance glasses. They must cultivate a broader perspective on events. Yes, God had punished Israel for her sins: but he had not consigned her to permanent destruction. Yes, he had disciplined her, but he had not abandoned her. As Malachi will record later on in his prophecy, 'I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed' (3:6).

This then is the central thrust of Malachi's prophecy, the context for everything else he is going to teach us over these four days. "I have loved you," says the LORD. Do not doubt it. Certainly you can point to plenty of unbelievers who seem to be having a much easier time than you are having right now. 'So what?' asks Malachi. 'It's all purely temporary.' For to be outside the covenant people of God is to be under God's judgment. It is to stand in danger, not only of his chastening hand, but of his everlasting judicial anger. What could be worse than that? Any blessing the world may think it now enjoys, Malachi tells us, is going to prove in the final analysis to be very ephemeral and shallow. This universe will witness the vindication of God's people. Believe it! How can you doubt it, when God has said, 'I have loved you'?

If you are a Christian, God says the same to you. No matter how much pain you may have had to endure, no matter how much humiliation you may feel you have suffered, God says to you and to me as he said to his prophet Malachi and the Israelites, 'I have loved you.'

What does Paul say in his letter to the Ephesians? 'He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world ... In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons ... in accordance with his pleasure and will.' (Eph. 1: 4-5).

Make no mistake about it, our conscious awareness of that special, electing, eternal love is the root of all true Christian commitment. It is the fuel that stokes all true Christian enthusiasm. Christianity is not a legalistic duty, a tedious routine in which we are driven by guilt or habit or mere tradition. Christianity is a joyous celebration of an unshakeable divine affection. 'I have loved you,' says the Lord. Do you believe that?

A young couple were to be married. A few days before the wedding the young man was becoming a little nervous about the huge promises he was expected to make. So he went for some fatherly advice to one of the older church members who had been married for many years. 'Tell me,' he asked, 'in all those years you have been married, have you never contemplated divorce?' The old man thought for a few moments, then replied, 'Divorce? Never. Murder - often!'

Perhaps that comes close to what God feels about us. Yes, he is rough with us sometimes; but that is precisely because he loves us. Whatever happens, he will not be separated from us; he is determined to take us to glory,

The implications of love

Consider with me then a few implications of this remarkable opening statement. 'I have loved you.' What does it mean?

First let me say what it does *not* mean.

No elitism

It does not mean that there is any excuse for elitism among the people of God. That danger has always existed, of course. The Jews have fallen into it at times. The Christian church in South Africa has done so too in certain respects. All Christians are vulnerable to the danger of treating God's covenant as the ground for some kind of racist arrogance. Put that idea out of your head; it is quite illegitimate. For the fact is, as Paul affirms on this very issue in Romans 2, God does not favouritism.

In that connection it is important not to misunderstand the phrase, 'Esau I have hated.' The Hebrew language often exaggerates to make a point. Technically it is called 'hyperbole'. Jesus used it once in Luke 14:26, when he said anyone who comes to him must 'hate' his father and mother. Can you imagine Jesus encouraging hate? But he was a Jew and used to Hebrew hyperbole. He did not mean, of course, that Christians should literally detest their parents, as his own attitude to Mary so conspicuously proved. But it was a vivid, idiomatic way of saying, 'There must be absolutely no hesitation about your devotion to me. You must love me above everything else.'

A boy might very easily say something similar to his girlfriend. 'You have been making eyes at that Julia Jones,' she says accusingly. 'Rubbish,' he replies. 'I can't stand the sight of Julia Jones!'

The truth is that Julia Jones might be a very attractive young lady, but he says, 'I cannot stand the sight of her because he wants to reinforce his affirmation of devotion to his own true love.'

In the same way, the Bible insists God loves the world. The psalmist says God is good to all, loving to all he has made. But he has a special love, a unique covenant love for his own people; a love which he does not share with the world at large.

A special responsibility

With the privilege of that special love comes also a special responsibility: to be holy and to be a witness. Israel had that privilege and responsibility. When she failed in it, God judged her. As the prophet Amos records, 'You only have I chosen out of all the families of the earth, and that is why I am going to punish you for all your sins' (cf. Am. 3:2). In other words, precisely because you are special to me, I am going to be specially careful to discipline you when you go wrong.

Anyone who thinks that God showed partiality to the Jews should re-read those tortured passages from the book of Lamentations describing the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem.] Indeed, anyone who thinks that God shows partiality to the Jews ought to look again at the photos of Belsen and Auschwitz. Israel was never God's pampered pet. If she interpreted the covenant that way, history has disillusioned her and rightly so. Israel was not God's favourite, and neither, in that sense, is the church. In every age, the people of God are his chosen vehicle to carry forward his purpose to the world at large. Yes, they have his word, but their responsibility is to obey it. Yes, they have a special covenant relationship with him, but their responsibility is to welcome others into that relationship.

As someone has put it, the church is the only organisation that exists for the sake of its *non*-members. The people of God exist for the sake of the world. The promise to Abraham was that through his seed *all nations* would be blessed. And Peter in the New Testament confers that role upon Christians: 'You are a chosen people, you are a holy nation, you are a people belonging to God' - why? - 'that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light' (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9).

When God says, 'I love you', then, it is not to feed any elitist arrogance in us but to ignite our missionary calling. Esau was outside the covenant, but there will be sons of Esau gathered around the throne on the last day, just as there will be people drawn out of every other tribe and nation and kindred. And how will they get there? Because the people of God have shown them the holiness of God and preached to them the love of God.

No spiritual pride

Again, it is all too easy to interpret the special love of God as grounds for spiritual pride. Perhaps your reaction when you hear God saying, 'I love you, but Esau I have hated' is to think how arbitrary it seems. There are the sons of Esau being allowed to plunge on their reckless route to hell, but God has arrested me. He has allowed me to discover spiritual life, he has opened my eyes, by some miracle has awakened faith in my heart. Why me?

Every child of God asks that question. It is inevitable that they should; every child of God is *meant* to ask it. But the vital thing we have to realize is that there is no answer to it. God told Israel what his reasons for choosing them were *not*. 'I did not choose you because you were a bigger nation than any other, in fact you are one of the littlest. And I did not choose you because you were a better nation than any other, because you are one of the worst' (cf. Dt. 7:7).

But never, never did he tell them why he *had* chosen them.

In fact, immediately we start to speculate about the answer to the question 'Why me?' we create a heresy. To answer it is invariably to generate a false anti-Christian religion of good works and spiritual pride. To answer it is to destroy grace. Why did he love me? 'Well, he loved me because I am a good person ... because I go to church ... because I have been baptized.' Or, of course for the evangelical, 'He loved me because I put my hand up at an evangelistic meeting. I went forward and made my decision. I signed my name on a little card. I prayed the prayer with the counsellor.'

No, no, *no!* God's love is not a response to any merit found or foreseen in us. It is a unilateral act of his own grace. It is unconditional, free and generous. The correct answer to the question 'Why me?' is not any sentence that begins 'Because, I . '

There is only one correct response, and it is, 'Thank you. I did not deserve your love, I had no claim upon it, I could not earn it, I cannot repay it. But you, Lord, out of your sovereign choice, have bestowed it upon me; and I am moved to the depths of humble gratitude by your generosity in doing so.'

Do any of us understand why someone should love us? Do we understand why our husband or wife loves us? The whole point about love is that we do not know why.

Beware of spiritual pride, then. A halo only has to slip a few inches to become a noose. What does the apostle Paul say? 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.' (1 Corin 1:27) .Lowly and despised things, mere nothings, to bring to nothing those who think they are something. Why? So that there may be no boasting in his presence. Yes, that is the key! There will be no boasting in glory, nobody sticking their thumbs in their golden waistcoats saying, 'Didn't I do well?'

No. We will be there because he loved us, and God only knows why!

We are not required to understand this love, to rationalise it or justify it; just to accept it, believe it, trust it.

The difference love makes

What difference should it make to the Jews to whom Malachi speaks, what difference to us, that we trust God's word when he says, 'I have loved you'? I am almost embarrassed by the number of avenues of application that suggest themselves. Let me give you just a couple.

Self-esteem

If we really believe that we have been loved by God in this way, it will mean we can have great dignity even in the midst of trouble and adversity. These Jews were cringing, complaining, and whining, because they thought Edom had had a better deal than themselves. But in fact, says Malachi, it is Edom who deserves their pity.

The same is true of us. There are an awful lot of people in the church who suffer from what psychologists call 'low self-esteem'. They wallow in self-pity, just as these Jews were doing. They tell you they are worth nothing. You can never pay them a compliment, they invariably

assume you do not really mean it. On the other hand, they leap at any opportunity to construe any comment as a criticism. Haven't you met people like that? The church is full of them. Perhaps, if you are honest, you recognise yourself as one. There is at least a strand of vulnerability to low self-esteem in most of us. But it is unnecessary.

For if you are a Christian, *God loves you*. That is no trite platitude to be stuck in a car windscreen. It is the truth of our existence. God loves us. The trouble with our world that we have trivialised the words, 'I love you.' Love has become a romantic vapour of the emotions, a sentimental measles which people catch and then recover from. We fall in love, as if it were a pothole in the road, and we fall out of love just as accidentally.

And that is sad, for it means love is not something people can rely on any more. 'Till death us part' - more likely- 'Till the judge us do part!' Love in the twentieth century has become a fair-weather friend: love for better, but not for worse. Consequently, our world is full of people disillusioned about love.

But that is not how God uses the vocabulary of love. For him, love is no casual affair, no wild adventure, accidental tumble. For him, love is promise and covenant. For him, love is a moral commitment to a quality of relationship which he is determined will last for ever. That is what he means by love: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love,' he says.

Now, how can you know that you are loved like that, and then run yourself down in a self-pitying inferiority complex?

I read once of a college student in the days of the Black Power movement in the United States. This young negro had found his own way of handling the problem of racial discrimination. He had a banner on his wall that said: 'I'm black, and I'm OK, 'cause God don't make junk!'

Yes, and God does not love junk, either. Is that not a reason then for every believer to hold his or her head up high?

I am reminded of the story of the little boy who was being jeered at in the playground by his peers, because they had discovered he was adopted. Eventually he rounded on them. 'All right,' he said, 'so I am adopted. All I know is, my parents *chose* me; yours couldn't help having you!'

Every Christian can say the same: 'God chose me.' In the mists of eternity past he saw me, loved me and determined to save me. Of course, he may sometimes discipline me. What good parent does not? But he will never abandon me.

Perhaps as for those heartbroken parents in the story I recounted at the start, there is something in your life which is a root of bitterness between you and God. You have suffered a grievous disappointment, a broken engagement, a failed marriage, a bereavement? Maybe you have been made redundant? Maybe you have failed a vital exam? Well, it is not for you, Christian to wallow in demoralised self-pity. For you are loved by God. You have dignity, you had better believe it! If you do not feel that dignity, it is no wonder that your enthusiasm for spiritual things is on the wane.

Holiness

If we know we are loved by God in this special way, we will also have a hunger for holiness.

'God loves you, you are special to him and therefore, you must be different.' That is the repeated logic of the Bible. There is an invisible line separating God's people from the world. It is the line defined by his love, his special relationship with them. Anything that blurs that line will bring the world into the church and the church into the world. If the people of God are compromising with the world it is ultimately because they have forgotten who they are; they have lost the consciousness of their distinctive call. They have forgotten that the king of the universe has loved them with a special love. If the world is in your heart, it is because you need to hear again that God has loved you. Yes *you* - in particular! How can we treat his worship half-heartedly, if we know he has loved us. How can we treat his covenant law so loosely when it matters so much to him? How can we speak such blasphemy as to suggest that he will let the wicked escape without punishment?

A strong sense of the special love of God for his people is the root of all gospel holiness. Walk worthy of your calling; Paul says it again and again. If we knew who We were, the world would be no threat to us. We would not be afraid to behave differently from other people. We would not fear to be called old-fashioned or narrow. We would know ourselves to be God's people, and the assurance of his love would nerve us against all those secular pressures that would seek to conform us to the ways Of the world. Here is the source of that hunger for holiness, which so many in this second generation of our evangelical movement seem to lack. God says, 'I have loved you.'

God has loved you; how much do you love him?

If you have done any pastoral counselling you will know all too well that marriages break down in one of two fundamentally different ways. Sometimes it is through unfaithfulness. An adulterous relationship is involved. Often, however, marriages do not shatter under the attack of external sexual attraction in that way. They die slowly from within. Imperceptibly, by degrees, husband and wife drift apart, affection cools, communication dries up, until suddenly to their horror they discover they have become strangers living in the same house. No third party is necessarily implicated at all. The couple have been utterly faithful (in the technical sense) to each other, but sadly - in the latter years of their marriage at any rate a chill has descended on their relationship. It is a case of faithful, yes ... but frigid.

And what is true of marriages is lamentably also sometimes true of Christians. The church is not called the bride of Christ for nothing. He expects of her not simply a dutiful fidelity but a loving attachment. And sometimes with the passing of the years, the fidelity remains preserved in our doctrinal formulae and our denominational traditions. but the warmth ebbs away. So churches lose the spark of devotion. They die slowly from within. Not for lack of doctrine, but for lack of love. That is exactly what was happening in Ephesus, of whom Christ complained at the very end of the New Testament: 'You have forsaken your first love' (Rev. 2:4). Would he say the same of us?

Christianity is not about loving the creed; it is not even about loving the Bible. Christianity is about loving Christ. We love the Bible because it tells us about him, but he is the true object of our love. We embrace the truth by embracing him, because he is the truth. Once any Christian - perhaps even out of a commendable concern to define the truth - separates love of truth from the love of Christ, then no matter how excellent their theology, no matter how explicit their creed, they have lost the – for the truth is in Jesus. Once the truth to which we are committed becomes detached from our personal commitment to him, it becomes academic and desiccated, and therefore erroneous, no matter propositionally accurate it may be.

It is so important that we understand this. Christianity is not just a matter of how we think, it is a matter of how we feel toward God and he toward us. We are precious to him, he is committed to us as a husband is to a wife; and when we backslide in our enthusiasm and our devotion cools, it disappoints and hurts him. He will not put up with it. He sent Israel into exile because her love had cooled. He may do the same to us, for he wants our love and he is not satisfied anything less. He will turn our lives upside down if he thinks it will re-awaken that love in us. He will put his finger on many issues as we study Malachi, but God's intention in this book is not to harangue us and make us feel guilty.

Fundamentally, his intention is to woo us to a new devotion to him. 'I care,' he says. 'I care about you. How could I possibly suggest I do not? I have loved you. Where is your love for me?'

THE SINS OF HALF-HEARTEDNESS
(Malachi)
a series of addresses given at the first Word Alive-Spring Harvest (1993)

2. APATHY (Malachi 1:6 – 2:9)

I want to read to you from a letter written about thirty years ago, from a young Latin American student to his fiancée, to explain to her why he was breaking off their engagement.

We have a high casualty rate. We get shot, lynched, jailed, slandered, fired from our jobs. We live in virtual poverty. We give away every we make above what is absolutely necessary to keep us alive. We do not have time for movies or concerts. We are described as fanatics; perhaps we are, for our lives are dominated by great overshadowing cause. This is the one thing about which I am in dead earnest. It is my life, my business, my hobby, my sweetheart. I work for it in the daytime and dream of it at night. I cannot carry on any friendship, or love affair, or even conversation, without relating it to this force which drives and guides my life.

That young man had been converted ... to Marxism.

People sometimes ask me what it is about left-wing politics that is so attractive, especially to students in the developing world; for intellectually, they point out, Marxist philosophy has more holes than a garden sieve. Its economic theories have conspicuously failed, its political predictions have invariably proved false, its violent revolutions have indisputably misfired. How can any intelligent person still believe in it?

The answer, of course, is that Marxism has never appealed primarily to the mind but to heart. 'Nothing great in this world' wrote Emerson, 'is ever achieved without enthusiasm.' Too true; the hallmark of every great revolutionary movement in the world has been that it is able to awaken passion in people- Merely capturing academic interest is never enough, because the strongest springs of our human motivation are wound on the wheel of our emotional, rather than our intellectual, life.

You may want to argue that it ought not to be so; if so, you have a case. Emotion detached from reason is fanaticism, as that young Latin American almost recognised, perhaps, in his letter. Yet anybody who wants to change the world, especially if by harnessing the energies of the young, must reckon with this basic fact of human nature. It is the emotional dimension that drives people and gives them enthusiasm for the task. And our problem, at least in the western world, is that in large measure we have lost that passion. Back in the 1950s John Osborne, the original angry young man, wrote a play, *Look Back in Anger*. Some of the lines from it are interesting:

'How I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm - that's all. I want to hear a warm thrilling voice cry out, "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I'm alive!"
'Oh brother, it's such a long time since I was with anybody who got enthusiastic about anything,'

Osborne is identifying a sense of disillusionment, particularly among young people in the second half of the twentieth century. Modern men and women are in the grip of a mental inertia so severe it is in danger of anaesthetising their drive. The prevalent attitude is 'I couldn't care

less'; that is the motto of the late twentieth century, and I fear it may prove to be our epitaph. We are a tired, *apathetic* culture.

'Apathy' is a word originally coined by the Stoic philosophers of Greece. For them it expressed their grim determination not to allow their feelings to jeopardise their inner tranquillity. The Stoic said, 'By an effort of my will, I am determined not to be bothered.' There was something courageous, almost noble about that Stoic apathy, even if it did tend to make them rather cold people. But for us today apathy is not a virtue cultivated by such disciplined mental effort. For us, apathy is a state of lassitude born of disillusionment and bored indifference: not 'I won't be bothered', but 'I can't be bothered.'

Thirty years ago, left-wing politics provided at least the illusion for some that there might be something worth bothering about. 'Maybe the enthusiasm of my youth', said that young Latin American student, 'can be channelled into something.' Marxism, for all its crazy theories, at least had the power to excite and inflame. It had a self-assurance that demanded sacrifice, It had a dream which, no matter how spurious, could give young lives purpose and hope. Little wonder that a Latin American student of the 1960s was willing to sacrifice his marriage to his Marxism. But the tragedy is that thirty years on, even Marxism has become a broken reed. Not even a fanatic can continue to believe in it.

Even as early as the end of the 1960s, graffiti were appearing in students' toilets around Europe expressing disillusionment with left-wing philosophy. One of the most famous read:

'To do is to be' - Sartre

'To be is to do' - Camus

'Do-be-do-be-do !' - Frank Sinatra

When I was at university many of my friends were very radical left-wingers. Many of them are now bank managers and such like. One of my great heroes when I was a sixth-former was a particularly left-wing revolutionary thinker. Now (as I discovered about ten years ago to my chagrin) he runs a Paris boutique.

Apathy - a church's crisis

Yet sadly the greatest tragedy in the wake of this collapse of credibility in Marxist revolutionary politics has been that so few of these disillusioned young men and women from the sixties and early seventies have found a new focus for their enthusiasm in the church of Jesus Christ. Why is that? Because, all too often, the church of Jesus Christ has sold out to apathy too. The church of twentieth century, at least in the West, has lost its zeal.

Some years ago, attending a conference on church growth, I was rather amused to find that one of the major questions being addressed was, 'Why are the mainstream denominations in Britain all declining numerically?' One of the preliminary pre-conference exercises had been a survey of church attendance, to determine whether statistics and graphs could shed any light on this situation. I was amused at the irony, for I suspect that the survey was symptomatic of the disease they were to identify

Once any group or movement starts analysing its failure with statistics and graphs, it is a sure sign that it is on its death-bed. It has lost its vigour and confidence. It is like a hypochondriac, who pores over medical charts but never recognises that the real cause of his malaise is in that negative and morbid attitude which moved him to look at those charts in the first place.

So the church in the late twentieth century has called in the sociologists, when the rot lies in the grassroots of the Christian movement. We have lost our passion. People used to talk about 'the church militant', but we have abdicated that word to the left-wing politicians. The average church member today is more emotionally involved in his football team than in the kingdom of God. He or she is more moved by the latest soap opera than by the gospel of Christ. Like those Laodiceans of old, we are neither hot nor cold. We are just tepid, lukewarm, half-hearted Christians. In a word – *apathetic*.

The apathy of God's people

In that respect we are remarkably similar to the people of God in the days of Malachi, for they had become apathetic too. A 'couldn't care less' casualness infected every aspect of their spirituality, and nowhere more obviously than in their attitude to public worship.

See how God speaks to them here.

'You have shown contempt for my name.'

'How?'

'You placed defiled food on my altar.'

'How have we defiled it?'

'By saying that the Lord's table is contemptible. When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?' (cf. 1:6-8).

The law of Moses laid down strict guidelines on the quality of animals to be used in the ritual sacrifices of Old Testament religion. They had to be the best; you were not allowed to bring anything inferior. The animal had to be young, healthy, unblemished and perfect. But Malachi's compatriots were ignoring those rules. If they could get away with presenting a second-rate or even a third-rate animal to the priests, they did. And Malachi is outraged by it; it is the brazen impertinence of it that gets to him. Do they really think that they can deceive God with their cheap sacrifices? "Try offering them to your governor!" he says.

Some years ago Her Majesty the Queen visited Cambridge where I live. As part of her visit, local traders clubbed together to provide a floral tribute. Can you imagine her reaction if the Guild of Commerce had presented her with a bouquet of withered dandelions? Such a gift would have been an outrageous insult to her elevated person and office. Well, says Malachi. It is the same sort of outrage you perpetrate when you come to church. How dare you present these tatty offerings to God! Do you really expect him to be impressed by such off-hand expressions of your devotion? Do you anticipate that his mercy or his blessing is going to flow into your life, when you have so little concern to win his approval? This is not worship. This is insufferable insolence!

'Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,' says the Lord Almighty. (1:10).

What an appalling thing for God to have to say! Yet, says Malachi, that is how God feels about it. You would be better off going down to the pub on Sunday mornings than going to church in that frame of mind. Why, if all you are going to do is to engage in such half-hearted empty rituals, you would better off in bed! Don't you realise who it is you are dealing with?

'Universalism' in Malachi

'My name will be great the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great the nations,' says the Lord Almighty. (1:11).

We need to pause here. Those of you who have read any commentaries on Malachi will probably be aware that this verse has provoked a considerable amount of debate among the scholars. Many liberal interpreters of the Bible have hailed it as a thrilling affirmation of universal salvation. 'Look, they say, 'Malachi sees pagan worship as worship of the God.'

Such a multi-faith pluralism, of course, is very congenial to our modern mood. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has often insisted that other faiths are really already worshipping Christ. unwittingly, under different names. We should longer talk about 'non-Christians', he suggests, but 'anonymous Christians', for everyone is a Christian really. John Hick, a protestant theologian. has gone so far as to recommend that competitive proselytising – that is the different world religions seeking to win converts for their own faith - should be abandoned. He urges instead a combined mission on the part of all the great world religions together, in the name of kind of common amorphous spiritual consciousness.

It comes as no surprise, when that ethos prevails in the theological establishments, that multi-faith services are becoming so fashionable in our cathedrals. Indeed, one has to wonder, if and Prince Charles is crowned, who will be standing alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury in Westminster Abbey? - always assuming that the ceremony is held in Westminster and not in some temple dedicated to New Age mysticism.

I shall have more to say about this subject tomorrow, for it is an issue that was of great significance to Malachi in his day as well. Suffice it to say here that 1:11 provides absolutely no grounds for that kind of universalism, though it has often been cited in support of it. It is quite unthinkable that Malachi is endorsing pagan idolatry, as if it were an acceptable expression of human spiritual awareness of the true God.

Three things at least count against such an interpretation.

First of all, if you read his words carefully, you will see that the worship he is talking about is quite explicitly directed to the unique God of the Bible.

'My name will be great among the nations ... Pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great.'

What name is that? Certainly not Baal, or Zeus, or Allah, or Krishna. The name Malachi is speaking of is Jehovah, the Lord. He speaking here of worship offered to the true God.

Secondly, if Malachi were endorsing a universalist theology as some suggest, it would fly straight in the face of the vert tough line he takes later on mixed marriages between Jews and pagans (cf 2: 11). As we shall see tomorrow, he is definitely not in favour of such things. But he could hardly to them, if he were the universalist some paint him.

The third reason such an interpretation fails is that it does not recognise the ambiguity of the tenses used in 1:11. The time reference of a Hebrew verb is often much more flexible than in

English. The tense used in 1:11 could have a future rather than a present reference. Thus, the NIV translates it:

'My name will be great among the nations ... In every place offerings will be brought.'

I am quite certain the NIV is right to do so, Malachi is not saying that worshippers of Baal and Zeus are unwittingly worshipping Jehovah under another name. He is saying that, one day soon, worshippers of Baal and Zeus - indeed worshippers of every false deity this fallen world has ever invented for itself - will acknowledge the true God.

This is in fact the first hint of a very strong emphasis in Malachi on the prophetic future, the last days. Malachi is anticipating a universalism all right, but it is not the universalism of multi-faith services in Westminster Abbey, where Hindus and Muslims address Brahma and Allah in spiritual fellowship with bishops of the Christian church. No! Malachi is anticipating here the universalism of heaven, a time when the whole human race will bow the knee to a single name: 'The Lord - he is God!' they will say – as the worshippers on Mount Carmel did when Elijah challenged them to choose between Baal and Jehovah (1 Kings 18:39).

Already, in exile, Malachi and other faithful Jews (such as Daniel) had proved that the God of the Bible could be acknowledged, even by pagan emperors like Nebuchadnezzar. There was even increasing evidence of proselytes coming to the Jewish faith from a Gentile background. Already books such as Ruth and Jonah warned them of the dangers of xenophobic prejudice. Their traditional enemies, the Moabites, the Assyrians and the Philistines, would one day respond to God's word. They *could* do so even now. God's purpose was wide enough to embrace them; it was not just for the Jews. And in the oracles of many of the prophets, a day when there would be a huge harvest from the Gentile nations was regularly anticipated (if you want an extraordinary example of that, look at Isaiah 19:19-25).

This then is Malachi's universalism. It is not the universalism of the liberal theologians. It is the universalism of the gospel of John, where we find the Master telling a Samaritan woman:

'A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth' (John 4: 21, 23).

It is the universalism of the book of Acts, where we find astonished Jewish Christians acknowledging:

'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life' (Acts 11:18).

It is the universalism of the book of Revelation. We find no dissidents among that crowd gathered around the throne; no-one shouting, 'Let's hear it for Muhammad', or 'Three cheers for the Buddha!'. The whole of heaven is united around a single throne (see Revelation 7:9-10).

'My name will be great among the nations' says the Lord Almighty.' It will happen, says Malachi; and yet you Jews, who of all people should be giving God the glory for his unique, incomparable, sovereign lordship over the entire world - you dare to treat his public worship with indifference, with apathy! You are not doing God any favours by worshipping him, you know. He does not need your pathetic gifts. He is the Lord of the cosmos, the great king who one day will be revered by everyone.

But you profane [his name] by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled', and of its food, 'It is contemptible.' And you say, "What a burden!" and you sniff at it contemptuously,' says the Lord Almighty' (1:12-13)

Many commentators suggest that the picture Malachi is portraying for us in the phrase 'sniff at it' is of these Jews turning up their noses disdainfully at the sacrificial offerings they were having to bring. But the Hebrew verb actually means to exhale rather than to inhale. So I wonder if the picture is not rather that of a heavy, weary sigh rather than a sniff: a weary 'Ugh, what a fag! What a burden!'

You can just see them, can't you: looking at their watches to see how long the service is going to last; fidgeting with their chorus books; counting the tassels on the high priest's robe to pass the time; wishing this tedious, boring business would all be over so that they could get their Sabbath lunch. Apathy is almost too weak a word to describe the appalling lack of emotional engagement with public worship they were performing.

The reasons for apathy

Now, what were the reasons for it? If we can identify them, maybe we will identify some of the reasons for apathy in the Christian church of the twentieth century too.

A lack of reverence for God's person

'A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honour due to me? If I am a master, where is the respect due to me?' (1:6).

Yesterday we saw that one of the primary reasons for this apathetic spirit in the people of God was that they had lost their assurance of God's love. They did not really believe in that love any longer. And that, as we saw, contributed in a major way to their spiritual half-heartedness.

But here in 1:6 Malachi sets against that their need to feel a proper fear of God. He wants to guard against any sentimentalising of the divine love, which might lead to a diminished respect for God's authority. 'He may love Israel, indeed he does; but you must not forget he is your sovereign master, he deserves "honour" (literally: weight, gravity) and "respect" (literally: terror or dread).'

To treat someone with honour and respect is the opposite of treating them as insignificant or ignorable. We must never let our view of the love of God so distort our thinking that we treat him like some kind of heavenly buddy. He is a great king, to be feared among the nations; but they did not fear him. They did not treat coming into his presence with the seriousness it deserved. Instead they seem to have breezed into the temple, offering their sacrifices as if they were tipping some waiter in a cheap restaurant.

Am I not speaking the truth when I say that we need to heed this warning about the fear of God? There is a great deal said about the love of God today. It is rightly and necessarily said, but it can lead us into a sentimentality that dispenses with reverence. In trying to make our public worship user-friendly, welcoming, suitable for all the family and informal, there is the danger too that we no longer communicate to one another and to ourselves the awesomeness of God. Partly, I suppose, it is cultural. we are not used to showing ordinary human beings honour and respect any longer, are we?

A group of American tourists were being shown round the Houses of Parliament. As they were being taken along one of the corridors, Lord Hailsham, who was then Lord Chancellor, appeared on his way to some civic occasion; he was dressed in his Chancellor's regalia, with heavy gold chains and so forth; he made a very impressive figure. As he approached, he saw, beyond the party of tourists, the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Kinnock. Wanting to speak to him, he raised his hand and called out: 'Neil !' Whereupon all the tourists dropped to one knee.

We smile at that story because it is somehow incongruous, in our modern democratic world, to imagine people kneeling like that to someone of higher rank. Even bowing to our sovereign the Queen has become a perfunctory nod of the head, these days, has it not? If we do not kneel to our earthly masters, it is no wonder that we do not kneel any longer to pray. I wonder if I am alone in thinking that something has been lost in the abandonment of that traditional body-language of prayer? If we had retained it, it might perhaps have gone some way to protect us from apathy.

A hypocritical spirit among the people

'Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord' (1:14).

That is revealing; it shows that there is an element of pretence in what these people were doing. Like Ananias and Sapphira (see Acts 5:1-11), these Jews wanted the kudos of being known as pious people but were not prepared to pay the price such a reputation required. So they cheated and lied; they substituted knackered mutton for the prime lamb they had promised to bring to the temple.

Hypocrisy is often the partner of apathy, implying as it does a lack of genuine feeling. Do you remember those famous lines from Shakespeare's Hamlet?

*This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (I.iii)*

As a playwright. Shakespeare was more familiar than most with the business of acting a part. And as he studied human behaviour, he clearly observed that such theatricals were not confined to the stage; all too often the image we try to project of ourselves is an artificial one, one we play for the benefit of others.

Some years ago, a young undergraduate in Cambridge confessed this to me very candidly. She said, 'I from a Christian home. When I go home in the vacation, I am the decent, respectable, virgin daughter my parents want me to be. But when I come up to college, I become a wild, dissipated, sexually permissive junkie.' She told me, 'My real problem is I do not know which is the real me.' In fact, she admitted that, even in coming to see me, she wondered if she wasn't just adding another role to repertoire, that of a guilt-stricken penitent, longing for priestly absolution perhaps.

I had a lot of sympathy for that young student. For in one way or another many of us fall into the same trap of inconsistency and unreality in our lives. I explained to her that she did have one thing on her side. In this pattern of pretence she had woven about herself, at least she was aware of what she was doing; she was suspicious of her motives, she was critical of her insincerity. At least she knew she was play-acting. At least she was still searching for some

nobler stance of inward honesty. At least she still wanted 'above all else to her own self to be true', even if she was finding it difficult.

Tragically, it is not always so. There are some who fix the actor's mask so securely to their faces they forget what they really look like. Pretence becomes so habitual they are no longer conscious that it is pretence. They practise double standards, they live a double life, they use double talk; and by some extraordinary feat of moral blindness, they feel no pang of guilt about all this duplicity. On the contrary, they frequently contrive to be sanctimonious and self-righteous. They parade themselves as pillars of the church, even as ministers. 'The church is full of hypocrites' jibes the man in the street. And the tragedy is that so often reproach is true.

Beware of unreality. There is person who, while he watches our performance on the stage of life, is never fooled by the false images we present upon it. He sees through the facade of affectation we erect; he observes the hidden inconsistencies; he perceives the false motives; he discerns the secret fraud. He is never deceived; he knows who we really are. He knows what we are really offering, no matter what we pretend to be offering for the eyes of others. So beware of hypocrisy. There is too much of it among us, and it always conceals a secret apathy, a secret contempt for God, a lack of real interest in spiritual things.

A lack of responsibility on the part of the professional clergy

'It is you, O priests, who show contempt my name' (1:6).

'This admonition is for you, O priests' (2:1).

What was wrong with the priesthood? It might be easier to ask what was right with it. For a start, the priests were colluding with the people in their presentation dubious and polluted offerings. They accepted the inferior animals without question, placing them on the altar. In so doing, of course, they were clearly indicating that they had as little regard for God's name as everybody else.

More than that, there was their general, shabby personal example. A priest, according to Malachi, ought to demonstrate what real reverence for God was all about. God's relationship with the tribe of Levi was conditional upon that. His covenant with Levi meant that life, health and peace would be mediated to the people through their priestly ministries, provided the tribe of Levi showed awe for God's name, and true instruction was found on their lips.

But these priests had violated that covenant. It was transparently obvious to everybody, from the stupefied yawns on their faces and the casual manner with which they did their business, that they were as bored with all this temple ritual as anybody else.

But most important of all, this priesthood had neglected what Malachi clearly regarded as their chief and most important ministry - which (perhaps contrary to our preconceived ideas about Old Testament religion) was not offering sacrifices on altar at all. The primary role of the priest, says Malachi, is the teaching of God's word.

"The lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction — because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty' (2:7).

But these priests were not preachers. Oh, no doubt they wore the right vestments, they mouthed the right liturgical words; but their sermons, if they preached any at all, were just

empty platitudes. Instead of challenging the general slide towards worldliness, spiritual indifference and apathy, they endorsed it.

'You have shown partiality in matters of the law' (2:9)

Almost certainly Malachi means that there was no consistency, no integrity in what they preached to the people. They bent the truth so that this apathetic, half-hearted people felt secure in their way of life. Their polished sermonettes each Sabbath offended nobody and converted nobody. Instead, by their endorsement of the general low standard of spirituality among God's people, they caused them to stumble. No wonder, then, that God says in 1:10 that he wishes someone would close their church doors. By leaving them open they were doing more harm than good. 'Make no mistake about it,' says Malachi, 'God will not overlook this appalling derogation of leadership responsibility There will be no blessing upon the ministry of such shallow clergy.'

'I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings' (2:2).

In other words: the benedictions that you priests conventionally announce at the end of the service will have no effect; why should I pay attention to prayers from people who are so uninterested in their mediatorial task? When you pronounce a benediction, it will have the force of a curse on these people, not a blessing. What is more, he says, I will destroy your prestige in the public eye,

*'I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices' (2:3),
'I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people' (2:9).*

It is always the way, of course. The world has ultimately nothing but contempt for clergy who do not live up to the standards of biblical faith and conduct they are meant to represent. We have bishops today who think they are doing us a favour by expressing scepticism about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. They think they are improving the public image of the church, helping more people to come to church.

But if you ask the person in the street, you will discover, quite to the contrary, that all such tactics do is confirm twentieth-century men and women in their utter contempt for the church. The same must be said for the scandals attaching to American TV evangelists that have hit the headlines in recent years. Such things undermine years of evangelistic endeavour. What was it Jesus said? 'If salt loses its saltiness ... it is no longer good for anything ...except to be thrown out and trampled' (Matt. 5:13).

A special word to leaders

We must not underestimate the very special onus God places upon those who are called to be pastors and ministers of his flock. James advises, 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly' (James 3:1). If there is one thing in the Bible worse than being a sinner it is being a stumbling-block. Better, said Jesus, to have a concrete necklace around your head and be dropped into the ocean, than for a person who has been a stumbling-block to God's people to face God's judgment (cf e.g. Mk 9:42). These are terrifying words on the lips of our Master, but they are words which, if we are Christian leaders, we had better not ignore.

'Take heed to your life and your doctrine': that was Paul's advice to Timothy (1 Tim 4:16). A Christian leader is not an authoritarian figure who can boss people around. He has only two weapons in his armoury of leadership: personal example (life) and Bible teaching (doctrine). Make sure those two things have integrity.

I am not saying that being that sort of teacher, preacher or pastor will make you popular or successful. It is quite clear there was a lot of pressure on the priests in Malachi's day to be the kind of priests they were. An apathetic church wants apathetic preachers. If you tell people about the cost of discipleship, they will all too often accuse you of religious fanaticism. If you spell out the need for conversion, they will call you a fundamentalist crank. If you speak of judgment to come, they will call you an intolerant bigot. On the other hand, if you tell people how easy the way is, all too often they will smother you with flattery. Legitimise their sin with your reshaped Christian ethics, and their faces will light up with admiration for your pastoral sensitivity. Abolish hell from your universalist theology, and they will give you university degrees.

Well did the poet Milton say: 'Truth never comes into the world, but like a bastard to the ignominy of him that brought her forth.'

All too often that is the case. But integrity is demanded of us in our personal lives and in our public teaching. Too many of us in the Christian ministry are simply not taking that responsibility seriously. Some of us are spending too much time in the office and far too little time studying. Some of us are offering our people five minutes when their spiritual condition is so appalling it needs at least fifty. Some of us think that by waving our hands over bread and wine once a week we are doing something. Some of us think that when we get into the pulpit we there to be stand-up comics or chat-show hosts.

No! We are there to be the teachers and exemplars of the word. Our lips and our lives must tell the same message, and it must be the message Of the Bible. That is what we owe our people: our holiness and our Bible teaching. If we do not give them that, we are giving them nothing, however well-organized the church is.

I am worried about the standard of ministry in evangelical churches, just as much as I am about that among those who are more liberal in their theological tradition. The trouble with these priests of Malachi's day is not that they were heretics; they were just comfortable preachers. They confirmed people in their preconceived ideas. They were conventional preachers; they never risked their public acceptability by saying anything unpopular. If anybody ever deserved the title 'conservative', these priests did.

I say again - that worries me. It worries me when people nod so vigorously in agreement with my sermons; I must be doing something wrong. It worries me, more generally, that so much preaching in our evangelical constituency is boringly predictable, that people come, not to be challenged but to be in confirmed in what they already know or think. It worries me that so much evangelical preaching is smug and self-assured, that so many evangelical churches are like mutual admiration societies. The real word Of God always disturbs, always surprises, always shocks!

What should a priest be? 'The messenger of the Lord Almighty' (2:7). That is an astonishing title. For elsewhere in Malachi, that is his own name: it is the title of a prophet (cf. 3:1-5). Clearly, Malachi believes that a real priest should have a prophetic dimension to his

ministry. Let those of us who are leaders, then, heed the admonition of his words. We carry a special responsibility for the apathy of the church.

THE SINS OF HALF-HEARTEDNESS (Malachi)

a series of addresses given at the first Word Alive-Spring Harvest (1993)

3. INFIDELITY (Malachi 2:10-16)

Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?

The man shall answer: I will.

(The Form of Solemnisation of Matrimony, *Book Of Common Prayer*)

Promises are important to relationships. They are important because we human beings are so unpredictable. No matter how long or well you know people, they never lose the capacity to surprise you or indeed to let you down.

A prophet in the Old Testament once compared the human race in this respect to a flock of sheep: 'We turn every to our own way' (cf. Isaiah 53: 6). It's a very appropriate analogy.

A zoologist acquaintance of mine once wrote a doctoral thesis on 'The Normal Walk of Animals'. He set up a course in the laboratory equipped with various kinds of instrumentation to try to measure how the gait of animals differed between species. He told me that he got excellent results from all sorts of beasts - except the sheep. No two sheep ever walked the same way along that course. Indeed, no single sheep ever walked that course twice the same way. Sheep behaviour simply was not reproducible. The sheep is not only perverse, he discovered, it is individualistically perverse!

According to the prophet, it shares that characteristic with human beings. Human behaviour is always idiosyncratic; it is not enough that we go the wrong way, to adapt Frank Sinatra, 'We do it our way', a way different from everyone else's. We are very original sinners! That, of course, makes life difficult. People whose behaviour cannot be predicted, cannot be trusted. And without trust, human relationships are impossible.

Take marriage, for instance. Here is a relationship which, if it can be terminated on the whim of either partner, can surely never be a deep and satisfying union. Neither partner can really afford to take the emotional risk of total self-giving to the other if the thought is there all the time: 'He or she may desert me.' A marriage without promises must always be a marriage with mental reservations, vulnerable to destructive suspicions and doubts. For you dare not commit all your hopes to a person you cannot fully trust, and you cannot fully trust a person whose future responses cannot be reliably predicted

That is why promises are important to relationships. A promise is a voluntary decision to behave predictably, a way of making my responses dependable without destroying my human freedom of action. 'I will love you, comfort you, honour and keep you for the rest of my life. The husband vows this to the wife, the wife to the husband. So the relationship is no longer the victim of fickle passion; it depends now on the truthfulness of the parties involved. The vital issue is no longer: 'Am I clever enough to predict her future behaviour?' or 'Am I attractive enough to sustain his future interest?'. The vital issue now is: 'Can I rely on my spouse's word?' The promise, by its pledge of constancy, makes possible a relationship of trust, where previously such a relationship would have been foolhardy and presumptuous.

The promises of God

Now one of the most remarkable and important things that the Bible has to teach us is that God makes promises. And those promises are vitally important in our relationship with him, for exactly the reason they are vitally important in a marriage. God's behaviour is not easily predictable either. Of course, he is neither capricious nor irrational, still less sinful; but his personality is unfathomably mysterious and his purposes unimaginably complex. As Isaiah says, 'No human being ever guessed what God was up to' (cf. Isaiah 55:8-9). No, if we are going to depend upon God's future behaviour, it can only be because he has made a promise to us. And the wonderful truth the Bible has to share with us is that he has indeed made such promises

The Bible calls them 'covenants', and the most important covenant was the one he made when he pledged to Abraham that he and his descendants would be blessed, and through them all the nations of the world would be blessed too. In the years after that promise was given, of course, the children of Abraham, the Jews, encountered all kinds of ups and downs in their historical experience. There were many occasions when God chastened them, when they experienced judgment at his hand. And yet the prophets of Israel never lost their confidence in the special relationship their nation had with God. Why? Because it was based on a promise. They could not always understand what God was doing. But they were convinced that his relationship with Israel was permanent because it was based on covenant love.

We have seen an example of that already at the very beginning of this book of Malachi. 'I have loved you,' says the Lord (1:1). Remember, he is not talking there about his general love for everybody. He is talking about his special. covenant love for the sons of Jacob.

Two things follow from this fundamental revelation in the Bible of God as one who makes covenants. The first is that *God is faithful*. A promise is no use at all if you cannot depend upon it. But God's word can be depended upon. As Moses said in Deuteronomy 7, he is the faithful God who keeps his covenant of love.

The second consequence, which is closely related to the first, is this: that *God requires faithfulness of us*. Faithfulness, that is, in our vertical relationship to him; faithfulness also in our horizontal relationships with one another. That of course is why Jesus, when asked to summarise God's law, said there are just two things involved: love God, love your neighbour. Covenant love works both ways. According to the Bible, we human beings are intended by God to live relationally in a covenant relationship with God and with one another - to love him. to love one another; and to do so reliably. The sure route to all divine blessing and all social harmony, indeed to heaven itself, is faithfulness - behaviour that can be trusted because it is based on a promise. On the other hand, the sure route to divine cursing, to social anarchy, the sure route in fact to hell, is infidelity - behaviour that cannot be trusted because it will not be bound by promise.

Sadly, we discover that it was that second route, the route of infidelity, which the Jewish seemed to take in the days of Malachi.

The infidelity of the people

Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another? (2:10)

Notice that phrase: 'breaking faith'. Look down the chapter and you will find it occurs again and again: in verses 10, 11, 14, 15 and finally at the very end, in verse 16: 'Guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.'

For breaking faith is exactly what Israel was doing. She was sinking in a sea of spiritual half-heartedness and moral declension, and the fundamental reason was that she was not willing to face up to the demands of covenant love. She did not believe in such covenant love towards her from God; and, because she did not believe in it, she was not practising it. Vertically she was being unfaithful to God; horizontally her people were being unfaithful to one another.

Left unremedied, such a situation spelt certain disaster. So, in our passage this morning, Malachi appeals to them to reconstruct this fundamental moral commitment to faithfulness at the centre of their lives. 'Listen,' he says, 'Do you not realise that by very nature we are together in a covenant relationship? Have we not all one father?'

Is he speaking of one 'Father' (that is, God), or 'father' (that is, Abraham, or even Adam)? Well, the commentators differ. Perhaps he is being deliberately ambiguous, alluding to both the vertical and the horizontal components of this covenant relationship simultaneously. Either way, he is saying this: 'We are a covenant people. We owe a debt, a duty of fidelity to God and another. Why then are profaning that covenant by breaking faith?'

He illustrates with two specific examples and both centre on marriage and family life. The first, in 11 and 12, concerns the taking of pagan partners in marriage. The second, in verses 13 - 16, is about the divorcing of marital partners.

Malachi then is no longer talking about public worship. He is now turning his searchlight upon the much more private, intimate sphere of the home. He is saying, 'Listen - God is just as interested in what is happening in your domestic affairs as in what is happening up at the temple. Don't think you can compartmentalise your life, keeping your religion and your private lives in separate boxes. On the contrary! God insists upon a full integration of your spirituality into every area of your life. So it is no good going up to the temple, offering sacrifices, then coming home to a pagan wife and wondering why your sacrifices bring no blessing into your life. It is no good weeping and wailing in prayer at the temple, and then coming back and divorcing your wife. God will not heed or bless those who break faith with him or with one another.'

Unfaithfulness towards God

It needs little imagination to the immense relevance a passage like this has for us and for our society today. Let us start with Malachi's example of the taking of pagan wives.

Judah has broken faith A detestable thing has committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord cut him off from the tents of Jacob even though he brings offerings to the Lord Almighty (2: 11-12).

Let me tell you about Joe. Joe says, 'It doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you are sincere.' He is a very liberally minded, tolerant fellow, He goes to church every Sunday, but he would be the last person in the world to press his religion on anybody else, least of all his wife. 'I am sure we will all find our own way to God in the end,' he confidently affirms. "The Hindu

has his way, the Muslim has his way, I have mine and my wife has hers. But like lines of longitude on a globe, eventually we shall find that our paths converge at the same pole. How could God possibly be so intolerant as to let only Christians into heaven? What an outrageously narrow-minded idea! No: it doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you are sincere.

There is no denying that Joe's is an immensely attractive point of view, especially in our modern world where mosques and temples vie with churches and chapels on the High Street. But is Joe right?

Let us fantasise a little for a moment. Joe, like me, enjoys walking. One day while out for a walk he meets a hiker.

'Lovely day,' Joe says.

'Great,' replies the hiker enthusiastically. 'I am on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. They tell me there is an impressive cathedral there.'

Joe considers for a moment. He is pretty sure the road the hiker is on leads in the opposite direction. But he is not infallible, is he? And he hates to be a wet blanket on somebody else's religious enthusiasm. Surely everybody is entitled to their own opinion. If this chap really wants to get to Canterbury, that road is as good as any other, he reasons. It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere.

Imagine another scenario. Joe works in a chemist's shop. He is not a trained pharmacist, but he packs the shelves and serves on the counter. He has picked up a little bit of knowledge about medicine. One day an elderly lady comes into the shop clutching a box of pills.

'My friend gave me these,' she says. 'He says they will cure my arthritis. But I'm not sure how many to take. Can you help me?'

Joe looks at the unmarked box hesitantly. Privately, he is almost sure he has seen the pharmacist dispersing pills from the poisons cupboard that look remarkably similar to these. But then, what does he know about drugs? And he would hate to discourage anyone in their suffering.

'If you really think they will help you, my dear, you just take as many you like,' he advises. After all, he reasons with himself, it doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you are sincere.

You may be saying that my imaginary encounters have caricatured Joe's position; that there is all the difference in the world between an attitude of religious tolerance and the kind of irresponsibility that knowingly recommends poisons gives wrong directions on a journey.

But is there really any difference? At the heart of all those things, you see, there is an issue of truth at stake. To say, 'It doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you are sincere', is nonsense. You might just as well say, 'All roads lead to Canterbury', or 'All pills treat arthritis.' Many world religions teach fundamentally disjunctive and contradictory things about God and the world. They cannot all be true, they cannot all be right. You can hold that they are all true or right only by defying all the normal rules of logic and radically redefining the very nature of truth.

The Bible will not commit such intellectual suicide. Malachi will not. And because he will not, he cannot endorse the marital choices which many of his compatriots were making.

Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying the daughter of a foreign god (2:11).

That is simply an idiomatic way of saying that it was becoming common for Jews to marry pagan women.

It is not difficult to imagine how they rationalised it. Their arguments would be very similar to Joe's. 'A person's religion is their own business, that's what I say. My wife has every right to worship whatever god she pleases. It doesn't do to have a closed mind. We'll all get there in the end. I heard the Reverend Levi say so in the temple only last Saturday!' - plausible, and clearly in Malachi's eyes, so pernicious.

Do not misunderstand. There is no racist prejudice motivating his criticisms. There is no support to be found here for apartheid race laws on marriage, or anything like that. The Old Testament is by no means as ethnocentric as some people make out. Never forget that Ruth, the girl from Moab, married a Jew and became an honoured antecedent of King David. But the point was, she embraced the God of Israel; she was a *converted* pagan. What Malachi disapproves of is the refusal of these men of Israel, who had married pagan wives to bring their homes under the authority of Jehovah.

Their marriages had lost their spiritual and religious dimension and had become mere contracts, based perhaps purely on a goal sexual gratification. No consideration was given to the implication such an attitude would have for themselves, or for their children, or for their nation. They were there in church every sabbath. but they came alone and were content to do so; it did not disturb them. They saw nothing wrong in a marriage that united two bodies without uniting two souls. For Malachi this was just one more mark of the half-heartedness which he could see spreading among the people of God in his day.

See what he calls it in verse 11: 'a detestable thing'. It is a word that is used in the book of Deuteronomy for all kinds of disgusting and disgraceful pagan practices. 'Why,' says Malachi, 'such marriages desecrate the sanctuary.' That is, they make the individual concerned unholy, so that when he comes to offer his sacrifice to God he pollutes the temple area by his presence. Such people, says Malachi, must be disciplined. They must be ostracised from the community, whatever their social standing and no matter how pious they may apparently be.

As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord cut him off from the tents of Jacob – even though he brings offerings to the Lord Almighty (2:12).

This, of course, is a very tough line. And there are several things that I need to say to you by way of clarification and qualification, if we are rightly to apply these words to our situation today.

Malachi was speaking into a particular historical situation

If you read the book of Nehemiah, particularly chapter 13, you will find that in the days of Malachi (which were also the days of Nehemiah, or a little after them) the whole Jewish community in Jerusalem was being imperilled by this practice of inter-marriage with pagan women. Everybody was doing it. Nehemiah found himself in a situation where half the children in the city were speaking Philistine, or Ammonite, or Moabite. They could not understand Hebrew or Aramaic, because their mothers did not speak it. What is more, many of the most prominent leaders in the community were involved.

That may very well be what Malachi is getting at when he adds in verse 12, 'whoever he may be'. There was a real danger that the cultural attrition that these marriages producing were in

the Jewish community would go unremedied, because the national leadership itself was hopelessly compromised by the practice.

The governor, Nehemiah, had to take some very draconian actions to address the situation, publicly rebuking very senior men, and insisting that Jews separate from their foreign wives. And it is important to realise that these words of Malachi are addressed to that same perilous and extreme historical situation. That is the first thing to note,

Malachi was an Old Testament prophet

The second is that there is something distinctive about the Old Testament period as far as inter-marriage is concerned. At this time, the whole plan of redemption hinged on the purity and survival of a particular nation. It was vital that when Christ came he should be born into a social context where people knew God's law, a place where people had read the prophets and were anticipating the Messiah the prophets had promised.

This was the very purpose of Israel in God's plan, that she should provide the arena in which the Saviour of world would be born. But all that could be lost if Israel became dissolved in the cultural melting-pot of ancient world. That is why, 'theologically' if you like, God supports Nehemiah and Malachi in this very strong line against inter-marriage; because inter-marriage was for perilous for the whole plan of redemption. The survival of the people of Israel as a culturally intact people was essential to his cosmic purpose.

Inter-marriage in the New Testament

When we come to New Testament times, this negative appraisal of inter-marriage is still there, but it is far less strident. There are two reasons. The first is that the historical situation has changed and the second is that the theological situation has changed.

The historical situation is different because now there are many, many Christians who are legitimately and unavoidably married to non-Christians. Some of these were converted from Gentile homes and families. They were already married to pagans when they became Christians. There was no way they could avoid that situation. More than that, the social structure of the first century meant that marriages were often arranged by parents, so a young Christian might well find he had no choice but to marry a young pagan woman. because his parents insisted upon it. Such people simply could not be blamed for the marital partners they finished up with. The church was bound to have many such mixed marriages in it; the more successful its evangelism, the more it would be faced with this problem.

But not only has the historical situation changed in the New Testament; the theological situation has changed too. In the New Testament, God's purpose is no longer dependent upon the survival of a particular ethnic group, with a particular cultural background.

The church now comprises people all nations and cultures. For the new covenant, which Jesus Christ has inaugurated, is no longer based on a genetic pedigree. It is based on a spiritual affiliation - one generated not by physical birth, but by the new birth of the Spirit.

Thus it is that, when Paul has to wrestle with this situation of mixed marriages in the New Testament, he treats it far less severely than Malachi. You do not find, for example, the apostles throwing people out of the church because they are married to non-Christians. Rather

The contrary. In I Corinthians 7:12-16, Paul deals with some who, perhaps under the influence of Old Testament teaching were saying: 'We should divorce our pagan partners.'

Paul's response is a negative one. 'No, that's not what you should do,' he says. 'In these New Testament days, there is no desecration of the church as a result of a mixed marriage as there was desecration of the temple in Malachi's day. Our situation is different. Rather, the unbelieving husband or wife is sanctified by the believing wife or husband. The believer does not bring contamination into the church because at home he or she has an unbelieving partner. No, the very opposite is true: believers take a holy, sanctifying influence back into their homes from the church. That is how you must look at it,' says Paul.

This is very important, of course for anyone here involved in one way or another with a mixed marriage. Whether by choice or by an unavoidable divine providence, your spouse is not a Christian. I would not wish you, if that is your situation, to be unduly dismayed in consequence. In Malachi's day, a pagan spouse represented a defilement of the sanctuary and a great peril to the destiny of God's people; but in the New Testament, a pagan spouse is regarded as an opportunity for evangelism. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7: 'Think about it, maybe you will be the means of saving your unbelieving partner. Do not divorce him or her.' It is a that view that Peter too supports in his first letter. 'If your husband not believe the word,' he says to the Christian woman, 'then go out of your way to be a good and faithful wife. Maybe he will be won over to the faith by the purity and reverence of your life (cf 1 Peter 3:1-2)

If you are involved in a mixed marriage, that must your unceasing hope and prayer. Do not treat your marriage as some kind of spiritual handicap that condemns you for ever to God's second best. It is not so. By the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life you bring a sanctifying influence into you family, which can only be for their good.

But - and it is a very big but - that does not mean that in the New Testament, the apostles encouraged mixed marriages in the church. They did not; in 2 Corinthians the apostle Paul also warns of the danger of being 'unequally yoked with unbelievers' (2 Cor. 6:14). And it may very well be that marriage is one of those 'unequal yokes' that he is talking about. Certainly, when in 1 Corinthians 7 he discusses a person who is free to choose her marital partner (as, in the ancient world, a widow was), he insists that the one she marries 'must belong to the Lord' (1 Cor. 7:39); that is, he must be a Christian.

So those of you who are single must not interpret the New Testament's more moderate attitude to mixed marriage, in comparison to Malachi's very tough line, as an invitation to contract marital relationships with non-Christians as if such things were innocuous. It is not so. The spiritual danger of mixed marriage is still there, because God's covenant is still there. The difference is that when you marry someone who is not a Christian, you are not imperilling the church, in the way that these people were imperilling Israel. But you are still imperilling your own personal spiritual well-being, for you are diminishing that covenant relationship with God which ought to come first in your life. You are breaking faith with him.

If you do not believe that a mixed marriage can do you spiritual harm, go and talk to people who are involved in them. You will not find them telling you. 'Oh! it's OK! You go ahead. No problem.'

No; they will tell you it is hard. All kinds conflicts of loyalty arise within a mixed marriage, which the Christian couple does not have to face. And there are temptations to spiritual backsliding

which may well prove irresistible, and which, in far too many cases, do prove irresistible. Every pastor can tell you the sad tale of young men and women who seemed to show such potential for Christian service but have finished up as casualties because their hormones got the better of them. They started by going out with non-Christians, because of course they wanted to 'witness' to them; they finished up by getting married to them.

Be sure of this, God is interested in whom you marry. Your vertical relationship with him demands that you make that choice wisely and prayerfully, for that with him can be irreparably damaged by a foolish and rebellious choice. In that sense, Malachi's words here are just as relevant to you as a Christian as were to those Jews. Do not marry the daughter of a foreign god. To do so deliberately is to court disaster; it is to break faith with the God who loves you and has called you to be his own. It is to break faith with Jesus, every bit as much as these Jews were breaking faith with Jehovah, And that brings to second kind of unfaithfulness which was being exhibited in Israel,

Unfaithfulness in marriage

In Britain every day of the week, thousands of marriages break up, many in savage pain. One partner walks out on the other, usually into the arms of someone else: 'I know you will understand' says the farewell note on the mantelpiece. But the truth in many cases is, of course, that they do not understand. Because when someone you love leaves you for someone else, it hurts. Few things in this world hurt more.

It is popular today to treat that old commandment 'You shall not commit adultery' as the vestigial remains of an outdated moral straitjacket. We are in the post-permissive society. Extra-marital Sex is not even naughty any more, it's normal. To suggest sexual continence as a possible solution to the AIDS problem is to invite ridicule. It is almost as bad as recommending the reintroduction of chastity belts. Opinion polls prove conclusively that the majority of men and women today expect to experience sexual intercourse with several partners during their lifetime.

Indeed, some sociologists argue that we are no longer a monogamous society. It would be closer to the truth to describe the marital situation in the western world today as serial polygamy - the convention of having only one sexual partner at a time. As someone has put it: 'It is not so much a case of "Marry in haste and repent at leisure" as "Marry in haste and *repeat* at leisure!".'

Something very similar was happening in Malachi's day.

Another thing you do: you flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure at your hands. You ask, 'Why?' It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. (2:13-14).

As we said in our first study, these Jews were treating divorce as casually as they would trading in an old car. A man looked at the wife he had married some years ago and noticed that she was beginning to sag a bit in the suspension and that her bodywork was deteriorating. 'It's time for a new model,' he thought to himself, And that was it; no thought that marriage was a covenant, a promise. No thought that this was a one-flesh union. seed by God himself.

'Everybody is doing it. We will remain good friends, won't we? I have just discovered, after fifteen years of married life, that we are incompatible. That's all.'

As far as Malachi was concerned, all the excuses collapsed when confronted with one single sentence:

'I hate divorce,' says the Lord God of Israel.' (2:16)

In my book, says God, divorce is as serious a crime as murder: I hate it as implacably as I hate a man 'covering himself with violence'. To tolerate divorce in the complacent way you people have been doing, therefore, is just more symptom of your spiritual half-heartedness, one more proof of your faithlessness.

Now once again we need to make some careful qualifications, if we are to avoid causing unnecessary hurt. Let give you three.

1. Divorce is not impossible

Malachi knew perfectly well that divorce was actually permitted in God's law; Moses made explicit provision for it in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. You may ask, why did God do such a thing if he hated divorce so much? The answer is given to us from Jesus' own lips. He said, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard' (Matthew 19:8).

Sometimes God has to make concessions to the fallenness of human nature. We cannot keep his law perfectly and it is occasionally a lesser evil to permit his moral law to be broken in, as it were, a regulated fashion that minimises the consequent damage, rather than to enforce that law rigidly and uncompromisingly. That is what Moses' divorce law was all about, says Jesus. It was a concession to our hard hearts, but it was not what God really wanted. He knew that keeping a couple together who were determined to break up was just unrealistic; it would do more harm than good. So the law had to make some provision for divorce as an inevitable fact of life in a fallen world. In that sense, divorce is possible - but that does not mean God likes it. On the contrary, he hates it.

2. In some divorces there may be an innocent partner

Malachi not deny it. Indeed, he suggests that the majority of divorces happening in his day did involve such an innocent partner. The abandoned wife was being deserted by her husband for no good reason at all, he said. She was an innocent party in the affair.

No doubt there are two sides to every story. But the Bible does make a clear distinction between the sort of behaviour which undermines marital happiness and the sort of behaviour which breaks a marital bond. Jesus, in his teaching on divorce in the gospels, seems quite clearly to recognise for instance that adultery constitutes grounds for divorce, and that a husband or wife separating from a partner in such circumstances is not sinning (see Matthew 5:31-32). Similarly, Paul seems to regard desertion by an unbelieving partner as grounds for divorce (see 1 Corinthians 7:15). These are areas of controversy, as I am sure many of you are aware. Not all evangelical interpreters would endorse all that I have just said. But Malachi is certainly not denying that in many divorces there is an innocent partner, who experiences the pain of the break-up without deserving it.

3. Divorce is not an unforgivable sin

Malachi is not saying here that a divorcee, even he or she is partially or totally responsible for the marital breakdown, has committed an unforgivable sin. God hates all sins. But no sin is unforgivable, except the repudiation of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Forgiveness is always available (see for example Psalm 51). In fact, God has a wonderful way of repairing lives shattered by divorce, and every pastor can tell you stories of that. But that is not to say that there are no painful consequences in our lives as a result of divorce. Divorce leaves emotional debris – hurt feelings which may take years to heal.

Often, Of course, there are children to be considered. Verse 15 is unfortunately almost untranslatable from the Hebrew. But Malachi seems to be acknowledging in it that one of God's purposes in marriage is godly offspring. That is reason he is so concerned about the sanctity Of marriage; because the emotional and moral stability of children hinges on their experience of the faithfulness of the marriage bond. If they do observe their mother and father being faithful to one another, they will not learn how important it is to be faithful in human relationships generally.

It should be no surprise that the moral behaviour of children and young people gives such for cause for concern in our society today. Any society in which almost every other marriage ends in divorce is going to be a society saturated with children who have suffered emotional and moral damage to their lives. It is an inevitable consequence of our shabby example of love. The murder of a little child by two ten-year-olds, the rape of a teacher by a teenage pupil – of course such stories horrify the nation; but it is no good beating our breasts and saying, 'Bring back the cane' or 'Rebuild the Borstals', as if that were going to change the situation. We are beginning to experience the moral fallout of our statistics of broken marriages. And we have not seen a fraction of it yet.

Nevertheless, our situation is not without hope. Christ can repair lives which divorce has blown apart - the lives of the divorcees themselves, and the lives of the children. He can work in that situation of brokenness and evil and turn it to his good. by his overruling purpose and grace. I am sure that some of you here can testify to such a miracle. So we do not need to despair in a situation of divorce, as though we have committed an unforgivable sin that can never be resolved.

God hates divorce

But having said all these things - that divorce is possible; that there is an innocent partner sometimes; and that divorce can be forgiven - it would be irresponsible of me if I did not draw your attention to unequivocal language with which God expresses his outrage concerning divorce.

'I hate it,' he says.

Why?

Because of the hurt it causes to the partner? Of course.

Because of the damage it does to the children? Of course.

But most of all, he hates it because it is one more example of broken faith, of promises not kept. Relationships depend on promises; and to treat divorce as casually as these Jews were treating it was to invite a collapse in relationships and therefore in society generally. There could be no deep and satisfying commitment of one person to another in a world that did not understand the importance of faithfulness to a promise. And it is just such a society that we are

generating for ourselves.

Listen to these words from Christopher Lasch, in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*:

Our society ... has made deep and lasting friendships, love affairs, and marriages increasingly difficult to achieve. As social life has become more and warlike and barbaric, personal relationships ... take the character of combat. Some of the new therapies dignify this combat as 'assertiveness'. Others celebrate impermanent attachments under such formulas as the 'open marriage'. Thus they intensify the disease they pretend to cure.

People in our world today are lonely, getting lonelier — because, as Hosea says, there is no faithfulness, no love, in the land (Hosea 4:1). People cannot trust each other anymore, because they will not keep a promise.

Erich Fromm, in his books *The Art of Loving* and *The Sane Society*, blames it all on the economic system. Capitalism, he says, reduces all relationships to self-interest. It makes real love impossible by its cultivation of individualism. Men and women do not really love one another in a capitalist society; they just use each other for the fulfilment of their individualistic needs, rather as a car owner uses a mechanic to service his car.

Other sociologists draw attention to the effects of the eroticisation of modern society by the media. Forty years ago the publication of D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was sufficient to scandalise the nation and bring about a court action. Now we have soft-porn videos, thinly disguised as sex-education courses on sale in Woolworth's. We have girlie magazines, that would once have been found only in some curtained Soho dive, on public display the High Street newsagents. And our advertisers seem incapable of marketing even so ordinary a consumable as a bar of chocolate without turning it into an object of phallic fantasy. Expectations of sexual athleticism in one's partner, and of sexual ecstasy in oneself have risen to extraordinary heights. I suspect that not since the closing days of the Roman Empire has the general level of sexual arousal in a society been quite so high as it is in ours. And in such an environment, it is not surprising if the boundary between love lust gets rather blurred.

So is capitalism to blame for the shallow quality of our relationships? Or is it the exploitation of sex by the media? I do not deny that those things play a part, but I suggest to you that it is Malachi who has the deepest insight: at the root of our problem is unfaithfulness, an unwillingness on our part to be bound to anybody by promise.

In the 1980s a group of sociologists at the University of Berkeley in California carried out a very interesting study which was published under the title *Habits of the Heart*. One of the most important questions they addressed concerned contemporary attitudes to feelings. They found that people holding traditional ideas took the view that feelings should always take second place to duty. So they placed a higher value on virtues such as self-control, self-denial, self-discipline and self-sacrifice. Marital love was seen as fundamentally a commitment of the will, which one ought to honour irrespective of one's personal feelings about it, whether good or bad.

But these researchers discovered an interesting thing; the traditional view was rapidly being displaced in the West by another attitude, which they characterised as the 'therapeutic attitude'. On this view, feelings take priority over everything else. The important thing is not what restrains the expression of the self, but rather what liberates it. Honesty and openness

are what count, not self-discipline or self-denial or self-control. Self-realization, self-fulfilment, self-acceptance, self-actualisation - these are the buzz-words of the therapeutic attitude. 'The spontaneous sharing of feelings between authentic expressive individuals' - this is the therapeutic definition of love.

Long-term commitment does not necessarily feature at all in such relationships. According to the therapeutic attitude, if my emotional needs are not being met by my partner, I am entitled to ditch him or her. The therapeutic attitude denies all forms of social obligation and replaces them simply by the ideal of open and honest communication between people. The only thing therapeutically liberated lovers owe their partners is to share their feelings fully with them. Emotional independence and self-sufficiency are the goal; and a relationship is seen merely as a device for achieving those essentially individualistic ends.

Now I am not saying that the therapeutic attitude is all bad. Undoubtedly, it does do some a great service by helping them to get in touch with their own wants and needs and emancipating them from the artificial constraints of a social role which is inappropriate to them. But it has to be said that, carried to its extreme, this sort of attitude is desperately corrosive of the marriage bond, because it destroys faithfulness. As far as the Bible is concerned, the key thing that makes us human is our ability to form relationships, and there can be no relationships, either with God or with our neighbour, unless we are able to be faithful to one another.

Love is not just a feeling intended for our private enjoyment. It is a covenant that binds two people together. Love is not a passion; it is a promise. You know the reason most people shy away from marriage today, why they do not even bother getting married, let alone divorced? They are scared of it. Those vows are just too permanent. Promise to love somebody for better for worse, for richer for poorer, till death us do part? 'Why,' says our twentieth-century Romeo or Juliet incredulously, 'you cannot possibly expect me to make an unconditional commitment like that. If they cannot do it in the Royal Family, how can you expect me to do it? Life-long promises are out of place where your feelings are concerned. Nobody knows how they are going to feel about someone else in ten hours' time, let alone ten years. There's no controlling Cupid. He is a capricious and arbitrary imp. He makes no promises, so how can I?'

'You fall in love, you fall out of love,' asserts our Romeo. 'It is sentimental measles; you catch it, you recover from it. Certainly you cannot rely on it. Those who gamble on love lasting for ever are backing a horse that regularly falls before the first fence. Where relationships are concerned, the wise keep their options open. Do not put all your eggs in one basket. Enjoy it while it lasts!'

But the Bible insists that that is all rubbish. There is a stronger kind of love than that, a dependable love. How do we know it? We know it because God has shown it to us. He is a faithful, covenant God. 'I have loved you,' he tells us. There is a cross on a hill, where the blood of God was shed to make a covenant with us. There is his promise written indelibly and by his own hand for the universe to see. 'I love you and I do not intend to stop loving you. I will give my very self for you.'

That is the kind of love he expects us to emulate. Not a passing whim, born of romantic sentiment or sexual lust, but a strong enduring covenant. That's what God means by love. Not a feeling but a promise.

So, says Malachi, guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith. Watch those wandering eyes, control those illicit fantasies. Settle it in your heart, he says, that you will neither break faith with your marital partner, nor with your God.

'Be faithful, even to point of death, and I will give you the crown of life' (Revelation 2:10).

THE SINS OF HALF-HEARTEDNESS
(Malachi)
a series of addresses given at the first Word Alive-Spring Harvest (1993)

4. CYNICISM (Malachi 2:17- 4:6)

When I was a young Christian, the question of rewards gave me a lot of trouble. It seemed rather discreditable to me that God should offer Christians incentives. It appeared to pander to the acquisitive spirit. The essence of the Christian ethic is unselfishness and altruism, so surely if people are going to serve God, let it be because he is worthy of it, not because they think they are going to get something out of it

I was a great admirer in those days of a hymn by Francis Xavier which we used to sing at school:

*My God, I love thee, not because
I hope for heaven thereby;
Nor yet because who love thee not
Are lost eternally.*

*Not with the hope of gaining aught,
Not seeking a reward
Solely because thou art my God
And my most loving King.*

Noble words, and bang on target, I thought. If God be God, then no matter if following him is an utterly thankless task with no hint of personal advantage, integrity surely demands I honour him. Faith is not a bargain I strike on the basis of some calculated profit margin. It is my unconditional surrender to the irresistible claim of God's truth upon my conscience.

Or so I thought in those early days. And in many respects, I still think like that. I do not approve, for instance, of evangelists who try to gain converts by offering inducements; by promising healing to the sick or prosperity to the poor, rice to the hungry or visas to the refugees. Such tactics are simply bribery, and those who respond to such appeals are likely to have no more true faith in them than a mercenary has true patriotism. No, the highest motive for becoming a Christian is that we want God in our lives, not the blessings that God may give us. Francis Xavier's hymn is a masterly expression of that sentiment.

But as the years go by, I have to confess that my youthful idealism has been moderated somewhat on this matter. I have discovered just how difficult it is to sustain the Christian faith in

This broken and unhappy world in which we live. There are an awful lot things around that contradict a breezy confidence in God, are there not? There is crime, war, natural disaster and sickness; tragedies of a dozen kinds are reported in our newspapers daily.

And such things quite clearly happen in a way that makes no distinction between good people and bad people, between Christians and non-Christians. Adversity is indiscriminating and arbitrary – at least, so it seems. The innocent suffer just as much as the guilty; indeed sometimes, the innocent seem to suffer far more than the guilty. The guilty, precisely because they are unscrupulous and self-centred, all too often get away with murder.

Do you know this little rhyme?

*The rain it raineth on the just
And also on the unjust fella:
But chiefly on the just, because
The unjust has the just's umbrella.
(Baron Bowen Charles, 1835-94)*

It is precisely this unfairness which Malachi's compatriots are complaining about in this final of his prophecy. 'What is the point of religion?' they ask. 'It's all very well for preachers like Malachi to pontificate about a of God of righteousness, but he has created an unjust world.'

It is not hard to feel some sympathy for such complaints. I think we have to acknowledge that the most serious objection that can be raised against the theistic faith of the Bible is the problem of evil. Other religions can adopt the dualistic solution. They can say, 'Well, there are equal and opposite powers of and evil in the world, locked in a never-ending struggle. All the good things that happen derive from the good force, from God, and all the bad things that happen derive from the bad force - that is, the devil.'

It is a very convenient theory. But unfortunately, the Bible cannot endorse it. No, it says; God is the absolute sovereign of his universe. Nothing happens outside his control. The devil is more than a malevolent rebel spirit, a creation of God, and far inferior to him in both power and knowledge. The book of Job tells us that he has no ability to harm human beings, except as God give him permission to do so.

In many respects this doctrine of divine omnipotence is very comforting, but it inevitably invites the question: 'Well then, why does this sovereign God give the devil so much rope?'

Again, other religions can take refuge in monism. The monistic solution to the problem of evil says that God is 'in everything'. All distinctions between 'good' and 'evil' are really illusory. For There is no evil except as we choose to call it so. Christian Science comes very close to this when it tells us that pain is 'all in the mind'.

*There was a faith healer of Deal
Who said, 'Though I know pain ain't real,
When I sit on a pin
And it punctures my skin,
I dislike what I fancy I feel.*

Convenient as the monistic solution to the problem of evil is, once again the Bible cannot accept it. It insists that God is good, that he loves what is just and right, that he stands over against all forms of evil, that he does not enjoy the pain or suffering of his creation in any way; and that is why goodness really matters, because it matters to him.

But once again, reassuring though a doctrine of divine righteousness is, it invites the objection: 'If God hates all this evil and suffering so much, why does he go on tolerating it?'

So the Christian feels exceptionally vulnerable on this issue of evil. The Bible forces us to tread a difficult path between dualism and monism, to believe in an almighty God who for some reason is allowing things to go on in his universe to which he is thoroughly opposed. It is not

difficult for atheists to ridicule such an idea. Bertrand Russell said, 'I can imagine a sardonic demon making us for his amusement, but I cannot attribute to a God who is almighty and benevolent the appalling weight of misery and degradation which has so marred the history of mankind.' (*The Faith of a Rationalist*, 1947)

Malachi's compatriots were basically expressing the same scepticism; with less erudition, and in a rather sulkier tone perhaps, but it was essentially the same point they were making.

'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them' (2:17).

'Look,' they were saying, 'there is brother Eliezer over there; everyone knows he has a mistress on the other side of town. It does not seem to diminish his business profits, does it? And then there's Jonah the rent collector over there, crooked as they come. He always wears a very suit, you notice. As for caring for the weak in society, the widow, the orphan and the refugee - forget it. That's a mug's game! Don't you know we are in the middle of a recession, Malachi? Look after number one, that's the only sensible policy. If God is so concerned that we Jews should keep his law, how come the pagans have got all the money?'

'No, religion is just a big confidence trick. What is the point of performing all those religious rituals, praying all those prayers? It's the proud and the oppressors who get on in life, not the the meek and lowly ones. People can defy God, even curse him to his face, and nothing happens to them.'

'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape' (3:14-15)

For Malachi this is undoubtedly the most difficult aspect of his people's spiritual declension with which he has to deal. Their apathy in worship and their infidelity in personal relationships he can

counter by appeal or by admonition. But at the root of this aspect of their spiritual half-heartedness lies not just laziness. Indiscipline or sensuality, but a profound doubt about the goodness and dependability of God.

And that is what makes the situation so serious and dangerous. Kenneth Clark in his great book *Civilisation* writes: 'We can destroy ourselves by cynicism, just as much as by bombs.' He is absolutely right about that, of course, for the cynic has lost confidence in values. The cynic says that it is an unjust world, that virtue is triumphant only in theatricals, and once a people has surrendered to that kind of radical pessimism, then moral anarchy, social decadence and pandemic despair are the inevitable consequences. That sort of cynicism is just as devastating as war, and there are plenty of civilisations that have fallen prey to its self-destructiveness.

The reply to cynicism

How was Malachi to address such a pernicious cancer in his society? There is really only one way. It is the Bible doctrine of rewards. Malachi cannot deny the negative and demoralising aspects of human experience of which these cynics complain; but he can insist that it is only one side of the story, a passing hiccup, an ephemeral blip in the moral order of the universe. 'No,' he says, 'it is worth serving God. Those who do not serve him will be losers in the long run. It is worth pursuing goodness. Those who do not do so will pay a price for their wickedness, in the last analysis.'

That hymn of Francis Xavier is all very fine and noble - but it is also naïve and sentimental. 'My God I love thee not because I hope for heaven thereby' - but if there is no heaven to hope for, how on earth can any love for God survive in this sin-sick world in which we live?

The whole point about the Christian faith is that it offers the final vindication of the goodness of God. No matter how dispassionate our quest for religious truth may be, no matter how high-minded our spiritual aspiration may be, there is no way faith can be rationally sustained in the face of present evil without a doctrine of rewards. That is why there is no embarrassment in Malachi's recourse to that doctrine here in order to counter the embittered cynicism of his society. Reward is not some bait on his evangelistic hook by which he is unscrupulously enticing the people of his day to believe. Rewards, for Malachi, are the necessary consequence of that victory over sin which God must win if there is to be any gospel for the evangelist to proclaim at all.

Some of us perhaps have been moved by our studies in Malachi. We have made resolutions to be less apathetic, less indifferent, more committed. And it is a good thing to make such resolutions; but I tell you this - they will not endure a month, perhaps not even a week, battling against the gale of adversity, fighting the tide of rampant wickedness in our world unless we are convinced it's all going to be worth it - unless we are convinced that God must win, and that because he must win, we shall be winners too. How does Paul put it? 'We share in his sufferings *in order that* we may also share in his glory' (Romans 8:17).

The rewards of commitment

What are the rewards for wholeheartedness to which Malachi draws our attention in these closing chapters? There are two kinds. In 3:6-12, Malachi teaches us that there is a reward for godliness *in this world*, in the here and now. But in 3:1-5 and 3:13 - 4:6 he points also to rewards that lie *in the future*, that belong to the last day. We will look at each in turn.

Present rewards

'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.' (3:10)

It is clear from 3:10-12 that one of the ways in which the half-heartedness of the Jewish community was revealing itself in Malachi's day was the lack of funds in the temple treasury. The people simply were not giving generously to God. It is no surprise. People who are too mean to give a good animal sacrifice are hardly likely to put their hands in their pockets for cash any more readily. But the verdict which Malachi passes on this parsimony may come as something of a shock, nevertheless.

'Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me ... You are under a curse the whole nation of you - because you are robbing me' (3:8-9)

Malachi's point here is that in the Old Testament, people were required by law to donate one tenth of their annual income to the temple. It belonged to God by right according to the law. So to withhold it, said Malachi, is nothing short of larceny. 'Is it any wonder, then,' he says, 'that

there is an economic recession? Is it any wonder there is no food in the shops, that Israel's reputation internationally is at an all-time low? Why earth should God bless a den of thieves? It is not as though he deserves such treatment.

'All through history,' says Malachi, 'Israel has been abandoning the Lord, kicking him in the teeth, refusing to do things his way; and all through history, God has been faithful to his covenant. He has never given up on us – and that is why we are still here in Jerusalem today.'

I, the Lord, do not change - so you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. (3:6)

'If he has denied us economic affluence, then, he is only fulfilling the promise he made to Moses. He told us in his law that if we as a nation ignore his moral rules, we will forfeit economic blessings. But he also told us that if we repented of our sins, he would restore our prosperity' (cf. Deuteronomy 27 – 30)

'Isn't it about time,' asks Malachi, 'that we broke this habitual cycle of apostasy? God invites us to do so. He never stops wanting us to do so.'

Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty. (3:7)

The promises of the covenant and the prosperity that goes with them are there waiting to be claimed by you. And there a very simple way to prove it. If you want to return, do so in your tithes and offerings, says Malachi. 'Put God's covenant promise to the test and see if it is not true that those who honour him, are honoured by him. The measure you give will be the measure you get. See if it is not true that he will open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing on you that you will not have enough room for it.'

There is a reward for wholehearted commitment to God in the here and now. And once God sees the evidence of it in the restoration of those missing tithes and offerings, you will receive it. You have only yourselves to blame for your current economic austerities. You will never discover the prosperity God wants you to enjoy while your mean fists are grasping your wallets so tightly whenever you come to church.

It is a very bold challenge, is it not? How do you think we should apply it to our contemporary situation? Is Malachi proposing a kind of prosperity doctrine? Give to God and he will give back to you. There are plenty of preachers around who have interpreted this text in exactly that way. There are countless churches that invite you, not to give, but to 'invest' in their work; implication being that you will get a return with interest. And who has not heard the testimony of those Christian business people who assure us that it was only when they started to tithe that, miraculously, commercial success began to be their lot?

But I want to suggest that it would be a mistake to read this passage as an endorsement of that kind of prosperity teaching. Let me tell you why.

The promise is to a nation

First, it is important to note that Malachi's words are directed to the nation as a whole, not to individuals; because, of course, the Deuteronomic law was addressed to society generally. That law promised the people collectively that, if they obeyed, they would be economically

blessed. But the Bible is far more chary about individualising such material rewards. It gives us, for example, the story of Job, a good man who obeyed God's law completely, and yet who experienced poverty rather than wealth

We must be as realistic about this, then, as the Bible is. For every Christian entrepreneur who testifies to the prosperity God has brought their way, there is another sitting silent in pew, who has been broken by bankruptcy. I am not saying that God does not bless us as individuals materially. Undoubtedly, he does. But there is no mechanical and inevitable link between the amount of money I put in the offering bag on Sunday and the amount of money in my pay packet on Friday. The blessings of which Malachi speaks here concern the macro-economy of the nation, rather than private fortune of the of the individual.

Malachi is an Old Testament prophet

Secondly, just as in the case of inter-marriage which we examined yesterday, the Old Testament of Malachi's words makes a vital difference. In his day, the people of God were a political entity and the temple of God was a national institution. But in New Testament days, the church is an international community and the temple has been replaced by the spiritual solidarity of the body of Christ. It follows then that the blessings and rewards of Christian faithfulness of which the New Testament speaks tend to be spiritual rather than material, eternal rather than temporal.

Now, it is true that there are compensations promised by Jesus that offset the cost of discipleship. But there is nothing in the gospels to suggest that the Christian disciple should expect to be wealthy. In fact, the reverse is true. 'Sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven' - that was Jesus' emphasis. He certainly said, 'Seek first God's kingdom and your material welfare will be taken care of' (cf. Matthew 6:33), but he was talking about food and clothing, not Aston Martins and caviar.

So how should we apply Malachi's challenge to his people, to ourselves and to our present day? Let me offer just a few hints.

I think that first of all, a careful application of his words can be rightly directed to *our nation*. Does this mean that the Archbishop of Canterbury should be recommending to the Chancellor of the Exchequer that the way out of recession is to put 10p on income tax, and devote the resulting revenue to the refurbishment of the Church of England and the remuneration of its clergy? At the risk of disappointing my Anglican friends, I have to say no, I have no confidence in such a policy at all. But I think the passage can be applied in this sense - that we, the body of Christ, as a prophetic community in our nation, should be as courageous as Malachi is in drawing the connection between economic decay and moral ills in our community.

Secondly, I think this is a passage that can be rightly applied within *our churches*. Does this mean that the pastor should insist upon 10% tithing of income as a requirement of church membership? No, that would be a legalistic measure, out of place in the New Testament church. But the principle of regularly giving to God's work a proportion of our wealth, prayerfully determined (as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8:11) in keeping with our income, seems to me a principle the New Testament fully endorses. We should be teaching our churches that if our people give in that kind of committed way, then we, as the community of God's people, will

find he opens the floodgates of heaven and pours out blessing upon us. Paul affirms something with which Malachi would have totally agreed, when he says, 'Whoever sows

sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously' (2 Corinthians 9:6).

And thirdly, I think there is a sense in which these words do rightly apply *to us as individuals* too. Do you want to return to God? Have you been touched by his word, and are you seeking some way of responding to the challenge, to be 100% for God in future? Well, Malachi is suggesting one way you can do that: a simple, practical, concrete way of consolidating your resolution. Christian discipleship begins in the head as we understand what God's word demands of us.

And it proceeds to the heart, where we respond willingly to the demands God places upon us. And between the head and the heart, Christian discipleship passes through the pocket. If it does not, then it is not real; that is what Malachi is saying. If you really mean it when you say you want to return to God, then the offering basket will be fuller next Sunday,

Put God to the test, then. There are rewards for the whole-hearted believer. Giving is good for you. It is not an onerous duty; it is a joyful privilege; it is a pathway to blessing. Malachi is convinced you cannot out-give God, but he does invite you to try.

Future rewards

There are present rewards for the faithful believer, then, but there are even greater rewards yet to come!

See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the Lord Almighty (3:1).

One of the most characteristic features of our contemporary world is its loss of hope. It was Woody Allen who made the remark that the future is not what it used to be. He was right. Optimism about the destiny of the human race has collapsed in our century. The political idealism of an earlier generation lies wrecked under the carnage of a dozen bloody wars and revolutions. All those predictions of technological progress that motivated the scientific enterprise have been shrouded in the mushroom cloud of Hiroshima and the pollution of Chernobyl.

It's true a few still cling to the old utopian dreams of a man-made paradise on earth. They talk of a 'New Age', the Age of Aquarius. But the vast majority of thinking people today are no longer wearing the rose-tinted spectacles of such a discredited humanism. Kenneth Clark, in the book *Civilisation* which I mentioned earlier, writes:

'Confident articles on the future are, to my mind, the most disreputable of all public utterances.'

And as the millennial year of AD 2000 approaches, I suspect that global insecurity will become more and more acute.

Malchi's compatriots seem to have been interested in the idea of a utopian new age too. They loved to speculate about the prophetic predictions of a coming 'Day of the Lord' when God would intervene miraculously and establish Jerusalem as the capital of the entire world. That dream had fired many of them as they had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. They were like

some Zionists today; they believed the kingdom of God was imminent. They had come home to get Jerusalem ready for the Messiah, for the Lord's coming

But Malachi has some words of caution to offer them in respect of that eschatological enthusiasm of theirs.

God will come in judgment

But who can endure the day his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years. (3:2-4)

The Day of Lord is certainly going to arrive, says Malachi. In fact, God will shortly send a prophetic forerunner to prepare for that day, one he calls 'my messenger' (3:1), and 'the prophet Elijah' whom I will send 'before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes' (4:5). But are you really sure you want that Day to come? For let's face it, says Malachi, you are a half-hearted people. Your public worship is apathetic. Your relationships are unfaithful, and your attitudes are thoroughly cynical. There is no way that the coming Day of the Lord is going to be a pleasant experience for people like you.

Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand he appears? (3:2).

For it is going to a day of a *refining* judgment. Whom is he going to purify? Not the pagans, not even the people in the pew - the Levites – he will purge the clergy of all their compromise.

It is also going to be a *punitive* judgment on a morally degenerate society.

So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,' says the Lord Almighty' (3:5).

There are countless sins that bear no penalty in our statute book. But God will execute judgment against them all.

But most significant of all, for this cynical audience, it is going to be a *discriminating* judgment.

A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name. 'They will be mine,' says the Lord Almighty, 'in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.' (3:16-18)

The books are going to be opened and the real people of God are going to be revealed. All lives will be assessed, and then the difference between the blessings of the righteous and the fate of the wicked will be transparently obvious to all. There will be no more room for cynicism then.

Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire, says the Lord Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them" (4:1).

I do not like the idea of hell any more than you do. But, you see, *unless Malachi can speak of such a final judgment, then the cynics are right.* Unless God imposes some ultimate sanction against the wickedness of the human race, his righteousness is a farce. Hell is not an embarrassment to heaven. God is glorified in judgment. For in judgment, he affirms his righteousness over against everything that denies it. And heaven is glad about that. *God will bring his reward with him*

But not only will the wicked perish; there is a positive side to this Day of the Lord too. Those Who fear the Lord and honour him 'will be mine,' says the Lord Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession.' (3:17).

'For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings' (4:2).

All the darkness which clouds our faith and makes it hard going to believe in God at the moment is going to be dispelled when the sun of his justice finally sends those clouds scudding away. And then there will be no more suffering and pain for the righteous, only healing and mercy

'You will go out and leap like calves released from the stall' (4-2).

Have you ever seen an animal released after being confined and frustrated by its cramped environment? It gambols all over the field in its new-found freedom. And in the same way, says Malachi, the true people of God who struggling in the confinement of this sin-sick world will find liberation; As Paul puts it, 'We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:23). That groaning not going to last for ever. The day of emancipation is coming, says Malachi; a day which will make all the suffering we have had to endure pale into insignificance by the radiance of its glory.

And when that day comes:

'You will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,' says the Lord Almighty' (4:3).

No, heaven is not embarrassed by hell, and you and I will not be either. It will not spoil heaven for us to know that God has judged the wicked. We will understand that it is the only way that heaven can remain heaven.

Recapturing the dream

I ask you: can you survive in this world of ours without a like that?

There is so much cynicism today. A young American student at Cambridge expressed it to me in words I have never forgotten:

'We Americans used to trust the generals, but Vietnam changed all that. We used to trust the politicians, but Watergate changed all that.

We used to trust the scientists, but Three Mile Island changed all that.
We used to trust the economists, but recession changed all that.
Now we know there is no-one to trust.'

He predicted that the 1990s would be years of cynicism, and so they have proved. The optimism of the past seems almost laughable. Experience has revealed it to be a fantasy of infantile human political imagination, as far removed from reality as Disneyland is from Hiroshima. And. I have to say, that disillusionment is most tragic.

I do not grieve because the intoxicated expectations of the early socialists and the early humanists have been sobered by a few bucketfuls of cold political reality. No, I do not mourn that; it was very necessary. Nor does it sadden me that people are more wary of technological advance. Scientific hubris is dangerous. As long as we do not plunge back into medieval superstition or Luddite paranoia, a little more ecological sensitivity and caution will be all to the good in our use of scientific discoveries.

No, what worries me is that mankind in the West has lost its dream.

We have lost the hope, the vision that gives meaning to our existence. It is not enough that we human beings should just survive; we need hope and purpose. Without some incentive like that we languish into apathy - yes, and cynicism; and ultimately into despair. Take away everything that people have to live for, and they put a bullet through their brains. And we can see the signs of such suicidal apathy and cynicism and despair all around us in our contemporary society. People are shutting future out of their minds in myopic self-indulgence. 'Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow - who knows? Enjoy yourself while you have a chance.' This is a world that has lost its dream.

Such a world is doomed. Slowly but surely, such pessimism tears the guts out of a culture. People have nothing to work for, nothing to save for, nothing to live for beyond the immediate satisfaction their desires. That, it seems to me, is exactly why the West is finding it so hard to advance economically right now. High interest rates are a consequence of the desire for instant gratification. You have to penalise people for consuming, in order to stop them. But it does not matter how high a penalty you impose on consumption, a hopeless generation will go on buying to comfort itself for its lack of future.

Where is our society to turn for hope, in days like ours when secular dreams have lost their credibility? Christians have an answer. Indeed, we should be more conspicuously different on this ground than perhaps on any other - not just because we maintain habits of religious worship in a secular age, or because we maintain standards of moral behaviour in a permissive age.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the most obvious thing about Christians may be that we still have hope, that we have not surrendered to cynicism, that we still believe in the ultimate triumph of goodness, that we are still looking forward to the future.

Why are we able to do that? Because the messenger of the covenant has come, just as Malachi said he would, with John the Baptist as his prophetic forerunner. And now he stands at God's right hand, clothed in victory.

Dr David Cook tells a lovely story of an Oxford undergraduate who, in his final year, somewhere around June or July, wrote a letter to his parents:

Dear Mum and Dad,

I know you haven't heard much from me in recent months, but the fact is this. A few weeks back, there was a fire in the flat and I lost all my possessions. In fact, I escaped with my life by jumping out of a second-floor window. In the process of doing so, I broke my leg, so I finished up in hospital. Fortunately, I met the most wonderful nurse there. We immediately fell in love and, well, to cut a long story short, last Saturday we got married. Many of our friends say this was over-hasty, but I am convinced that our love will more than compensate for the difference between our social backgrounds and ethnic origins.

By this time, Mum and Dad, I suspect you may be getting a bit worried, so let me tell you straight away that everything I have written in this letter up to now is false. I made it up.

The truth is, two weeks ago I failed my final exams. I just want you to get this in the proper perspective!

Certainly there is evil and suffering in the world. We Christians cannot deny it. And if you want to allow it to make you cynical, you can, But Malachi wants you to get it in the right perspective.

Surely the day is coming (4:1).

There is a reward for those who seek the face of God. Do not doubt it!

So we come to Malachi's final words. They constitute a postscript, not only to his prophecy, but to the whole Old Testament.

1. Pay attention to the Bible.

Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel (4:4).

2. Be ready for Jesus' coming

I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes' (4:5).

3. Love one another earnestly

He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers (4:6).

4. Never surrender to the cynicism that doubts the reality of future judgment

I will come and strike the land with a curse (4:6)

