

Sunday Evening 2nd December 2012- Derek Peat , Malachi 1-3: "Looking backward and looking forward."



Malachi prophesied in the days after the exile and the rebuilding of the temple, but before the sadly needed reforms initiated by Ezra and Nehemiah. Much of Malachi's message was against the corrupt practices of the priests, and against the divorce, oppression of the weak, and general ungodliness carried on by the people. He summoned the nation to repentance and urged the people

to purify their worship, pay their tithes in full, and obey God's law, promising that God's blessing would then once more be on them.

Malachi proclaimed that a day of judgment was to come, bringing purification by burning away sin as in a refiner's fire. But before this "day of the Lord" (which was commonly associated with the coming of the Messiah), God would send a messenger to prepare the way (verse 1). Jesus himself described John as the messenger foretold in Malachi 3:1

In contrast with the situation when Ezekiel was prophesying Malachi is in a somewhat happier situation. The temple has now been rebuilt and people are beginning to sort out their lives. However, preaching approximately 100 years after Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi is prophesying to a people whose devotional life has once again fallen away. They are presenting second rate sacrifices at the temple; they are no longer tithing; they are intermarrying with non-believers and idolaters, having divorced their Jewish first wives. When Haggai had challenged the people and urged them to repent they had listened and responded. By the time of Malachi the people have strayed so far from the Lord's ways that they do not seem to see what Malachi is making such a fuss about. They have become so enmeshed in the ways of the world around them that they no longer perceive there to be much wrong with the way they are living! This 'remnant' people is a community in decline.

Derek compared the Israelites of that era with our own modern day church. Like them many people in the church today think they can argue with God and defend behaviour that contradicts his teaching. Sadly there are ministers today who believe that God's Word is there to be reflected upon then dismissed if it does not suit their own views. There are numerous TV programmes and newspaper columns where debates take place on religion and ethics. Participants in these discussions continually ask 'how?' and demand answers and explanations for God's actions, whilst ignoring Biblical teaching.

'Who can endure the day of his coming?'

These people thought that God had not kept his side of the bargain as previous prophets had foretold. They were therefore half-hearted about fulfilling their side of the bargain.

Chapter 3 clarifies the role of John the Baptist – there is no timescale mentioned. The Jews are still awaiting the Messiah's Coming. There are 2 parts to the work of the Messiah: the First Coming and the Second Coming. Jesus will fulfil the second part of the promise at his Second coming.

Zechariah had urged the people to look after the widows and orphans. The most discussed issue in Scriptures is idolatry; the second most discussed issue is care for the poor. The Lord will judge those who do not care for those whom he cares about.

The second part of Malachi's prophesy deals with the unchanging nature of God. God is changeless. The problems of the world exist because the world has changed and needs to change back to God's ways. God's message to the people is "Return to me and my ways". His message to us today is the same. Like the Israelites we must review the resources we give back to God - our time and our talents as well as our money. We cannot 'cheat' God. God's promise is that he will reward us abundantly if we honour him with our faithfulness.

"Put me to the test" says the Lord. This is the covenant relationship God desires to have with his people. For us Christ's sacrifice on the Cross has given us immeasurably more than we deserve.

We today need to be an evangelising church that restores and carries forward knowledge of God. Society today no longer knows what's involved in entering a church building. Derek referred to individuals, non church members, who had asked what kind of 'ticket' they needed to enter a church. The world today does not know what it needs to do to return to God and avoid judgment.

Malachi's people had grown too comfortable and blasé. They believed God has not fulfilled his promises and they drifted into a complacent disregard for God's decrees.

Whether it is the Jews awaiting the Messiah or we, the Christians awaiting the Second Coming the true hope is described in Malachi 4 when the righteous will receive the crown of glory. When the Lord returns in judgment, only those who have kept his ways will be saved.

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Sunday Evening 25th November 2012- Kenneth Gray, Habakkuk 3: "I stand in awe of your deeds."



As we began chapter 3, Kenneth reminded us that the previous chapters led us to consider why God was using the very wicked to judge the sinful. We wonder why the work of Christian men and women in society often seems to be hampered and frustrated when the activities of evil doers seem to flourish. What this chapter reminds us is that __we must not let the focus of our lives shift from God on to ourselves__. Whenever our vision is diverted

in this way we begin to lose confidence in God. We tend to sink into a place of self-absorption and self-pity and negativity soon pervades all our thinking. Kenneth recalled the response of one elderly Christian lady when hearing the self-pitying complaints of another individual whom she was visiting: **' God promises enough for our needs, not our greeds!'** Jesus offers us the way of the cross – not a bed of roses in this life.

Habakkuk does not descend into self-pity. He listens to God's answer and recognises that Babylon worships idols and there's no power in idols only in the Sovereign Lord.

“Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it. But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”

We are also reminded of our study of Jonah Chapter 2" “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs”."

People today waste their lives clinging to idols of materialism, social status, careers, even family. They fail to realise that concentration on such things hampers our relationship with God. Habakkuk recognises that his complaints have been motivated by self-pity but now he sees that his only task is to worship and serve God. To know this is also to understand that there is no guarantee of a pain free life. Service implies sacrifice.

Kenneth reflected that in war situations, for example the D-Day landings, some troops were given less dangerous jobs than others. Whilst the overall campaign was successful many troops lost their lives in contributing to that positive outcome. We are called to act in the same way. We must not question where God has placed us to serve him or what we have been asked to do. Like Habakkuk, our task is simply to fulfil our calling.

In chapter 3 we receive a sense of God's power from Habakkuk. "“Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spear. In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations. You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one.” "God's power is seamless and overwhelming.

God's creative power is infinite and awesome. Habakkuk sees God in the wonders of the created world around him. In our day man has achieved many marvellous works. But all of man's amazing feats of art, science and engineering pale into insignificance when considered alongside the least part of God's creation. We have been blest with diverse abilities and powers but they are nothing compared with God's power. Man had devised numerous ways of destroying life but only God can create life from nothing or restore life to the dead.

Pondering the might of God, Habakkuk grasps something of what it will be like for the Israelites when the Babylonians overrun them. God will let his judgment fall on his people in order that they will know him and return to him in repentance.

Habakkuk re-evaluates his response to God. His faith is not prompted merely by his need for a Provider Lord. Rather, his faith springs from a love of the very person of God. "“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour”."

This is the challenge we all face. Do we come to God so that he can give us what we feel we want and need or are we drawn to him because of who he is? How many of us would be in church next Sunday if things had gone badly for us during the preceding week?

Unlike Habakkuk we have never had to live through situations of such privation and disaster. We read these verses spoken by Habakkuk and say 'Amen' but we have never been so tested. We see

need all around us but we are largely indifferent to it or else we act then quickly suffer 'compassion fatigue'. Talking to a Christian audience Jackie Pullinger MBE, charismatic missionary to Hong Kong and founder of the St Stephen's Society, once remarked that what the church needed was 'soft hearts and hard feet' but what it had was 'hard hearts and soft feet'!

Let us continue to search our hearts and examine our motivations in our response to the Lord – he deserves no less from us, his people.

Sunday Evening 18th November 2012- Kenneth Gray Habakkuk 1; 2:1-4 "Is that really fair?"



In our continuing study of the minor prophets Kenneth now turns our attention to Habakkuk. A contemporary of the better known Jeremiah, not a lot is known about Habakkuk except that he was prophesying the same message as Jeremiah – the fall of Jerusalem and the Lord's judgment on the Israelites.

In considering that Jeremiah and Habakkuk were doing the same job at the same time, Kenneth reflected that there exists a similar situation within the Church today.

We find that there is almost a fashion for and certainly an increasing focus given to large churches whilst smaller, everyday congregations, striving to do the same job, are considered less appealing or 'fashionable' and thus attract much less attention. In our day churches like Holy Trinity Brompton, for example, have attracted so many people through the Alpha Course that they have gone on to plant a series of successful satellite churches in other city areas where the Church had been in steep decline. We in Freeland, a small village church, should not be discouraged by this trend. One of the Church of Scotland's greatest strengths has historically been its commitment to providing centres of worship in every parish. Whilst those large churches flourish and effectively serve the large urban areas there is equally a role for smaller churches in small towns and rural areas. We are each called to be faithful to the task God has given us - regardless of our geographic situation or size.

Among the prophetic writings Habakkuk is unique in that it includes no oracle addressed to Israel. Rather, it contains a dialogue between the prophet and God. Habakkuk's perspective on his role is somewhat different from other prophets we have studied in this series. Chapter 1 sees Habakkuk arguing with and even rebuking God.

"How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?"

This is a very bold and strong complaint uttered by a chosen man of God. He upbraids God for allowing a list of the sins of the people, as well as the sins of their oppressors to go unpunished. He actually accuses God baldly of not listening.

Kenneth observed that many modern commentators on social trends deplore the economic polarisation in current society and complain of the vast inequalities that are evident in our world.

Many cry out against the injustices that allow the gap between the haves and the have-nots to grow wider. The truth is that it was ever thus. Habakkuk is crying out to God about the injustices being visited on the Israelites by the Babylonians and challenging God to intervene to stop them.

God does indeed answer Habakkuk but the prophet does not like the answer he receives. Again he expresses his 'disapproval' of God's plan. He feels God's response to be extreme and thinks it unfair that God intends to chastise a bad people by means of a worse people. What Habakkuk fails to appreciate is that evil cannot be destroyed without God.

Evil on this scale cannot be reasoned with – the source of the evil is the Evil One himself and it requires God's power to overcome it. As Kenneth commented, history has repeatedly illustrated this truth. Human attempts at appeasing evildoers like Hitler, Stalin or Mao Tse Tung have never succeeded. The conflict in the Middle East has now flared up again and there is currently much talk among the politicians about negotiation and sending emissaries. The conflict will continue and the death toll will rise until the politicians decide the carnage must be stopped. Then drastic interventions will be considered.

Habakkuk's response to God's solution is to try to defend his people about whom he has just been complaining- a typically human reaction. At the start of chapter 2 he seems almost too confident in his own reading of God's will. He seems to be expecting God to 'think better' of his plan now that Habakkuk has challenged his decision! He is alert for God's next response, expecting him to have changed his mind. He will come to realise that God views the world through the eyes of eternity.

When we call upon God do our prayers smack of arrogance or do we have the humility to accept his sovereignty?

In verse 2 of the second chapter God is forbearing and compassionate when he answers Habakkuk. He speaks clearly and exhorts his prophet to write the message down in tablets of stone so that there can be no doubt God has spoken and what he is saying will come to pass.

The message of Habakkuk has relevance for us. If there is no Christian revival in this country soon then God's judgment will come. Historians have questioned why, in the mid-1800s in Britain, there was no revolutionary uprising such as was being experienced in many other parts of Europe. This era of revolution and the overthrow of governments in Europe was an era of religious revival in Britain. So many of our great (now empty) churches were built during this period. We need a new revival now.

Let us continue to pray for revival in our land.

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Sunday Evening Service 11th November 2012 – Kenneth Gray. Jonah 4 “An angry man”



Kenneth commented that we find some passages of the Bible hard to understand because the theology is difficult to grasp or the message is challenging and complicated. Here in chapter 4 the difficulty lies in trying to fathom how Jonah could show such childish petulance in his response to God's treatment of Nineveh.

This is the man who had uttered the words "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."(Chapter 2:8-10)."

Despite this realisation that God is gracious and good and the only means of salvation, he now goes into a huff with God and is angry and resentful that God is going to spare the Ninevites. How could Jonah possess such insight about the merciful nature of God yet be filled with such bitterness that he expresses a desire to die rather than see Nineveh saved?

Kenneth observed that we have sometimes, in our own day, seen individuals who were not wholly good having remarkably impactful ministries. We can call to mind, for example, certain American evangelists who set up churches in most inauspicious places and within a relatively short time achieve thousands of conversions. They write books about church planting that race to the top of the publication charts and they spread their methods via the broadcast media. Then after a time some are found to have feet of clay and sensational stories of sex scandals or financial fraud emerge or the lauded preacher is found to be preaching some heresy or other, causing people to stumble and doubt the truth of the Gospel. We wonder how such flawed individuals can have such a strong ministries.

In the case of Jonah we find a man who has preached so powerfully that the king and 120 thousand of his subjects change their ways and repent of their sins. We would expect any such preacher to be humbled by and to rejoice in these transformed lives. Not so Jonah. He is not joyful that God has used him as the means of changing minds and softening hearts. He does not feel blessed to have been God's instrument of salvation. Instead Jonah is angry with God and he does not even try to hide it but, like a petulant child, he challenges God to let him die. He has desired the death of the Ninevites but God has spared them and Jonah thinks God has made an error!

Jonah had hoped his preaching would have fallen on deaf ears. His hatred of the Ninevites has led him to expect them to be incapable of repentance and he has misjudged God's power to use him to transform them.

What does Jonah's behaviour warn us about our own attitude towards those we regard as 'beyond the pale' ? When we think about the enemies of our Western world do we hate them and wish their destruction or do we pray for them that they will be won for Jesus Christ?

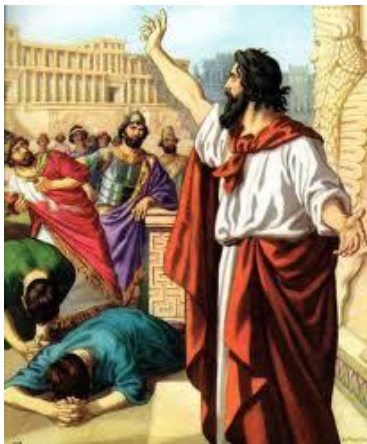
Jonah climbs to a high place to look down on Nineveh, still hopeful that his calling out to God will have made God see 'the error' of his decision. He remains hopeful that God will indeed destroy the Ninevites and his hope is reinforced as the vine miraculously springs up to give him shade in his vantage point. But the vine withers and a savage wind scorches Jonah. Still he would rather die than see God's mercy triumph. Jonah's anger grows and his petulance is unrelenting. God explains to Jonah what Jonah should have discerned for himself – Nineveh needs saving. Not once in his pleas to God has Jonah mentioned the people of Nineveh but it's the people that God is concerned about.

The Church in our Western world is overly concerned about preserving the institution. Too much attention is paid to problems about the buildings, the finances, the size of congregations, the politics. Too little attention and effort is directed towards the business of converting the unconverted.

As we conclude our study of the book of Jonah what response should we have? Let us stop looking internally at ourselves and stop concerning ourselves with **things** and let us start thinking about **people**. The mark of a truly Christian Church will be whether we demonstrate Jonah's attitude or God's.

Sunday Evening Service 5th November 2012 – Derek Peat. Jonah 3 "Expecting revival"

Jonah is chastened



In chapter 3 Derek takes us through what happens when Jonah now does as God tells him. Jonah has repented and God gives him a second chance to complete the task he has been given. This is reassuring for us to ponder. Not only does God show love for Jonah and forgiveness of his disobedience but he also gives him another opportunity to carry out the mission that has been earmarked for him.

As Dr R T Kendall puts it "God chastens us in proportion to the work we have to do. " God's chastening is not punishment or some way of 'getting even' with Jonah – it is a way of 'refining' him for the task. We know that God 'got even' at the cross and if any of us is currently experiencing the cross we can be sure that God has something special prepared for us to do. God chastens Jonah because he has a great plan for him to fulfil.

The Sign Of Jonah

Jonah's role as a prophet was already underway and he knew that preaching the word of God would have an impact. The prophecy delivered by Jonah is that the Ninevites have 40 days to sort themselves out or God's judgment will come upon them. How did Jonah convince the people of Nineveh? Jesus makes reference to Jonah's message in Matthew 16:4-5 " 'You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.' "So

he left them and departed.’ Jonah’s preaching had the ring of truth because it was a God-given message preached faithfully. It turned things around and the Ninevites repented.

Jonah’s task is our task

We are called to be like Jonah in our generation but repentance is a hard message to deliver. If we were to emulate Jonah today in the streets of Glasgow, say, what would be the result? We’d not be preaching about ‘40 days’ but about the Second Coming. People would take offence or laugh at us or simply cross the street to avoid us. Jonah preached God’s message and that message is the same today – repent and be saved! People today are still looking for a sign but they reject what God sends them and go on looking elsewhere for other, more palatable signs.

Let the Word speak for itself

Derek described a recent encounter he had had in his chaplaincy role with a patient in hospital. Mindful that it was not his job to evangelise but to offer comfort and support, he nonetheless found himself drawn in to a Jonah-like discussion with the patient in response to the man’s vociferous critique on Christianity and Christians. The man had questioned why God, if he existed, did not give the world a sign so that he could believe. He demanded to know why he should believe in Jesus Christ. Derek gave him the message of the Cross and the need for repentance.

This experience reinforced for Derek the awareness that people, both inside and outside the church, are confused about Christianity due to the lack of sound biblical preaching. The world desperately needs God’s Good News. The Scriptures need to be preached in a way that does not confuse people or sow seeds of doubt. Preachers should focus on this rather than on other seemingly worthy socio-political agendas or their own pet hobby horses.

As we ponder the results of Jonah’s preaching we discover that the Ninevites repented and were saved. **They believed God not Jonah.** This is a useful reminder that we should not be surprised when people repent on hearing the Truth of God’s Word. The Church must also consider what it will do with those who do repent, how we will embrace and include them. We need to tell people what God desires them to know – that he is at work in the world today – and to preach Christ crucified.

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Sunday Evening Service 28th October 2012 – Derek Peat. Jonah 2 “The Assurance of An Old Story”



Derek reflected that as adults we usually read a book, enjoy the story and move on to our next book probably without ever re-reading it. Children, however, seem to enjoy the repeated retelling of their favourite stories, reliving the experience afresh and being reassured by the familiar outcome.

Jonah is an old, familiar story with a simple and effective message - that God is the God of second chances.

Context

In chapter 1 we found Jonah to be a reluctant prophet, set on doing his own thing rather than God's will because he does not like the idea that God wishes to show mercy to Nineveh. This made us think about our own attitudes and forced us to consider whether we had people we'd prefer to see suffer for their sins rather than enjoy salvation from God. This chapter ended with the consequences of his disobedience being visited on Jonah – he ends up in the belly of a big fish. God has sent the fish to hold Jonah and keep him safe because he has not yet given up on his chosen prophet.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, in his writings on this book noted that Jonah did not get to where he was going, since he was thrown overboard, and that he obviously did not get a refund on his ticket. So he paid the full fare and did not get to the end of his journey. Barnhouse says it is always that way. "When you run away from the Lord you never get to where you are going, and you always pay your own fare. On the other hand, when you go the Lord's way you always get to where you are going, and He pays the fare."

Jonah has tried to thwart God's sovereignty and is now given three days and nights to consider his actions. Now in chapter 2 Jonah sends up a prayer to God.

There are four principal aspects to Jonah's prayer: honesty; confession; thanksgiving and sacrifice.

1. **Honesty.** Jonah makes no complaint about his predicament. He accepts he has been judged because he has done wrong. The maturity of his faith in God helps him understand that it is better to be right with God through honest repentance rather than to persist in resisting God's command. We can all too easily wander from the narrow way – even sometimes without really realising it. It can happen gradually until we find ourselves at a point that, when things start to go wrong in our lives, we blame God rather than ourselves.
2. **Confession.** He knows he must say he is sorry for not doing God's will in order to have God's grace restored to him.
3. **Thanksgiving.** Jonah is grateful that his relationship with God has been restored because of God's graciousness. It does not matter now if he were to die because he is now right with God and is saved for eternity.
4. **Sacrifice.** Jonah has now adopted a sacrificial attitude: 'What I have vowed I will make good'. He fully understands that salvation ONLY comes from the Lord.

These four aspects should also characterise our own prayers.

What does Jonah chapter 2 teach us?

- a) God's commands are not to be taken lightly. For example when Jesus gave us the Great Commission it was not merely a suggestion – it was a command: "Go and make disciples of all nations". Nor was it an instruction only to ministers and missionaries – it was an instruction to all of us. When God says 'Go!' we should go.

b) God can act in strange ways. As C S Lewis put it" "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world".
Jonah is a clear example of God's chastening hand.

c) God doesn't bear grudges. Our disobedience is not enough for God to turn his back on us. God wasn't finished with Jonah. Let us hear the message of Jonah and turn back to God , considering afresh his will for us.

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Sunday Evening Service 21st October 2012 – Kenneth Gray Jonah 1 “Running away from God”



Kenneth recalled that last week's Alpha Course session had dealt with God's guidance. During the group discussion we had talked about the difficulties we sometimes experience in recognising God's hand in our lives and we sometimes feel we receive conflicting messages about what God wants us to do.

For Jonah there was no such dubiety; he knew exactly what God wanted him to do – he just didn't want to do it! It's very easy to criticise Jonah but, if we are honest, we too can resist God's prompting and make excuses for not doing what we know he wants us to do. How would we feel if God asked us to drop everything and go off somewhere to preach the Gospel? Jonah is frequently condemned for his faithlessness but he was being called to do a very difficult task.

His reluctance to go to Nineveh did not derive from fear of the Assyrians or lack of trust in God. Jonah knew God wished to use him to bring Nineveh to repentance but Jonah wanted Nineveh to be destroyed.

This mind-set has sometimes characterised the church's operations historically in various parts of the world. The church has at times been swifter to judge, and condemn than to save. We must all guard against such an attitude when dealing with evildoers or those who resist the Gospel. Kenneth recalled his own consternation when, some years ago, a parishioner had described corpses of German soldiers he had discovered during WW2 in a bunker. Each soldier was wearing a regulation uniform belt the buckle of which read" 'Gott Mit Uns' " - God with us. Kenneth had never before really considered that the German soldiers would have had faith in God or that their armed forces would have had chaplains.

The big issue for Jonah then was how to get out of doing God's will. He heads off in the opposite direction from Nineveh by boat, hoping God would pick someone else. This 'escape' to the furthest limits of known geography seems to have been embarked upon without any planning or forethought. He has done what he has felt compelled to do and now lies fast asleep on the boat whilst everyone else on board is trying to deal with the consequences.

The sailors emerge as men of character in this story. This storm is something outwith their experience. They are puzzled because they cannot fathom where this storm has come from, but they do show considerable insight. Having ruled out typical causes and attempted normal strategies for riding out the storm, they recognise it derives from a spiritual conflict of some sort. (How unlike most people today whose response to society's problems – marriage break-ups, crime, economic pressures – is unlikely ever to be attributed to any spiritual cause.) These sailors possessed an intelligence many of us lack because of their closeness to the forces of nature. They realise it's someone on board who's the problem and they focus on Jonah.

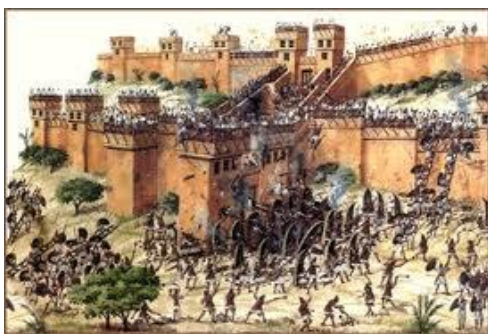
Now Jonah shifts responsibility for resolving the situation on to the sailors rather than himself. He could have told them to take him to Nineveh. He could even have said 'I will throw myself overboard'. Instead he tells them to throw him overboard which requires them to go against all their training and instincts as sailors, not to mention their common humanity. Having vainly tried everything humanly possible, the sailors finally do throw Jonah into the sea and immediately calm is restored. The sailors are filled with fear at this demonstration of the power of Jonah's God.

How many painful things are there in the maelstrom of our lives, or the lives of people we know, or even our nation, that could be made peaceful and resolved if only we were to listen to and obey the will of God?

Chapter 1 ends with the familiar words known to every Sunday school child "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.' " This is a hard thing to believe – it takes faith. Clearly Jesus believed it. As Jonah was in the belly of the fish 3 days so would Jesus be in the grave 3 days and as Jonah came forth from the fish so too would Jesus come from the grave.

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Sunday Evening Service 14th October 2012 – Jack McHugh Nahum 3 “Woe to Nineveh”



In his introduction to this final chapter of Nahum, Jack suggested that we were all probably rather relieved to be coming to the end of this series of studies which deal graphically with the fiery wrath of God.

As we are reminded by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 " 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' "

When we review the book of Nahum therefore we must consider what it has taught us that can help us with our Christian walk. In this modern era sermons that focus on the wrath of God are perhaps less frequently preached than in previous generations. Some maintain that God's wrath is an Old Testament concept that is no longer relevant because we know Jesus whose coming changed everything. This is a misunderstanding. God's wrath is not the whole story but it is a reality. He rained down his wrath on Jesus his Son instead of on us who deserved it.

We do not like this picture of God. We prefer to think of the ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’ of our childhood hymns. __But this God of love and of mercy, as he surely is, is also the God of judgment and of wrath.__ How can we fully appreciate God’s salvation if we do not stop to consider from what we have been saved? Nor will we appreciate the magnitude of Jesus’ sacrifice until we recognise what that sacrifice entailed. We will not flee to Jesus Christ until we repent.

The Book of Nahum is best read in tandem with the Book of Jonah with which it shares a number of characteristics:

Both are Old Testament Books; both concern minor prophets; they are of almost identical length; and God’s dealings with Nineveh are described in both. Both books also end with a question and the implied answers to each reveal something of God’s nature.

“Should I not be concerned about that great city?’ Jonah 4:11. ” The end of Jonah reveals the compassion of God for a people expressing regret for their sinfulness and a desire to repent.

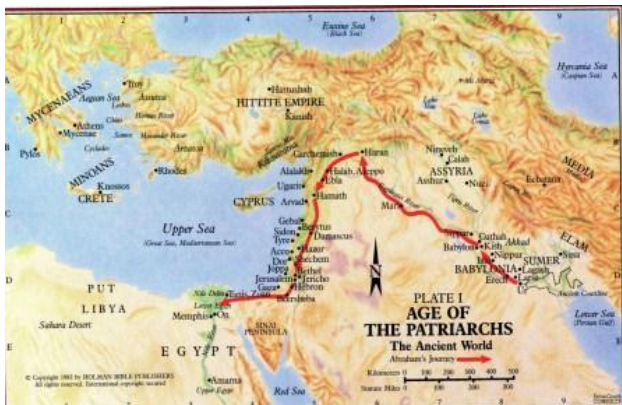
“Everyone who hears this news about you claps his hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?’ Nahum 3:19.” The end of Nahum reveals that Nineveh has deserved God’s judgment. It is God’s nature to abhor sin – he cannot tolerate it so his judgment is inevitable for the unrepentant. Repentance brings access to God’s grace in the book of Jonah but in Nahum unrepentance leads to damnation. The Lord is slow to anger but judgment is inescapable for those who harden their hearts.

What, then, have we learned from our study of Nahum?

Nahum is intended to be a comfort , firstly, to Judah whose faithfulness to the Lord is vindicated when its enemies are destroyed and, secondly, to us as Christians today. Like Judah we can feel we are surrounded by evil forces who despise or disregard the ways of the Lord. We always seem to be swimming against the growing tide of secularism. Nahum teaches us that the evil around us will not go unpunished. God is wrathful **because** He is love. His nature will not tolerate sin. The good news is that Jesus experienced God’s wrath in our place. Now we have been called from darkness into light and it is our responsibility to spread this good news around the world and encourage others to repent.

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Sunday Evening Service 23rd September 2012 – Kenneth Gray Nahum 2 “A Kingdom Restored”



Kenneth reflected that this chapter of Nahum called to mind the TV programme ‘World At War’. In World War II the pace of warfare had never before been faster. Unlike WWI when trench warfare resulted in slow gains and losses of ground for each side, the technological capabilities employed by the combatants in the second World War saw cities rased to the ground in days, even hours. People found it hard to come to terms with

the extent and pace of the destruction.

In this passage Nahum describes how the people of Nineveh will be destroyed. They will find that their defences, hitherto impregnable, will be overrun. Their crack troops will be found to be useless in face of the power of the Lord. This Nineveh, the equivalent, say, of Washington or Tokyo in our day, was rich and powerful, redolent of worldly success. As Nahum pronounced these prophecies the Assyrians would have responded by sneering at this 'extremist', confident in their own power and resources.

Such has been the attitude of unrighteous rulers throughout history towards the Church and the laws of the Lord. They have failed to realise that the church "is an anvil on which many a hammer has been broken."

Nahum's prophecies come to pass. Nineveh no longer exists and modern Syria has no ties with the former Assyria. But why is this happening to Nineveh? God's hand is now on his own people once again – they are repentant whilst the Assyrians remain unrepentant.

Some may ask whether it is fair that God chooses one people over another. We do not know why God does so. We too make choices. For example when purchasing a house we have the right to choose one property over another. No-one accuses us of 'unfairness' because of the houses we've rejected. So what's unusual about God choosing? The hardest thing for us to come to terms with is why God chooses us, such imperfect beings!

We see Nineveh doing what it's always done before in order to withstand its enemies – but to no avail. History lecturers talk as if history is progression, but it is never fixed and finished. An observation of recent history might make us cautious about assuming that the USA will always be a dominant power, especially as the economic reality is that they have built their society on borrowing rather than on what they've created.

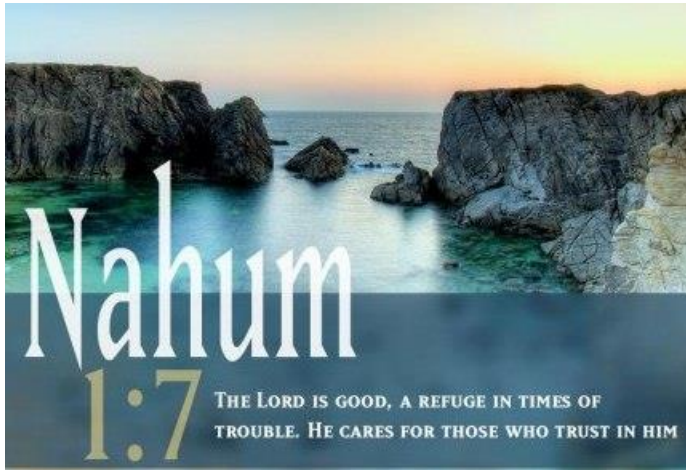
Mediaeval historians describe Constantinople as a Christian citadel that stood seemingly impregnable for 300 years. When attackers eventually discovered its weakness Constantinople fell and its treasures were plundered. Since the Islamics had no interest in Christian documents these found their way to the west and in time this led to the Reformation.

Nineveh's defences are found to be wanting and the people are shocked and unprepared for being vanquished. Nineveh had become rich and powerful by stealing from everybody else. When it fell nobody shed a tear for its people.

In verse 13 we read the chilling words "I am against you" says the Lord God Almighty. These words can be directed towards any people on earth who imagine their history, their power, their status can insulate them from the Lord's judgment. We cannot assume that these words will not be turned against us if we are disobedient to the Lord's will.

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Sunday Evening Service 16th September 2012 – Kenneth Gray, Nahum1 "Listen before it's too late!"



In our continuing studies of the minor prophets we find Nahum foretelling how the wrath of the Lord will be visited on Nineveh. Kenneth observed that it is often the way that good news for one person means bad news for another. We saw this in the recent Olympic games where one athlete's success inevitably resulted in defeat for his fellow competitors. Nahum's detailed and chilling description of what will befall Nineveh is followed by balm to the ears

of Judah for whom the destruction of Nineveh will bring relief and restoration.

The destruction of Nineveh had earlier been prophesied by Jonah but the Assyrian King had repented, and his people too, so that the Lord had stayed his hand and spared them. However their repentance was temporary and the Assyrians reverted to their former wickedness and brutality until the Lord's righteous anger was again aroused. Nahum is thought to have been prophesying some time between 663BC and 612BC (when Nineveh was indeed destroyed). In the first 6 verses Nahum outlines a fearful description of the extent and magnitude of the Lord's power. When he destroys the wicked he obliterates them completely.

It is not fashionable nowadays in some churches to mention the wrath of God and the focus is only ever on God's love and forgiveness. 'Sin' is an unpopular concept and frequently every possible excuse is sought by preachers and church members to gloss over people's rejection of Jesus Christ. Abraham pleaded for the salvation of Sodom and Gomorrah and if the Lord had been able to find even 10 righteous men in those cities he would have spared them.

Now, through Nahum, Judah is told to expect the obliteration of a nation whose power has dominated the region for some 150 years. This is indeed good news for the people of God. Having detailed the destructive power of the Lord Nahum now details the complete and wondrous process of Judah's imminent relief. To enable the people to take heart in this promise Nahum describes what will and will not happen. And this relief will not be temporary –

"Whatever they (Nineveh) plot against the LORD he will bring to an end; **trouble will not come a second time**. They will be entangled among thorns and drunk from their wine; they will be consumed like dry stubble.This is what the LORD says: "Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be cut off and pass away. Although I have afflicted you, (O Judah) I will afflict you no more. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed."

This message to the people of Judah is also a message for the present day. Critics of the church abound. In our world there are legions of people who sneer at the Gospel and reject Christ. From time to time individuals and régimes arise whose wickedness spreads and seems invulnerable. The message from Nahum is that no evil power on earth, however widespread and influential, can withstand the judgment of the Lord. The challenge for us is to remain faithful and stand on God's Word, undiluted and uncompromised, no matter how unpalatable the world finds it.

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Sunday Evening Service 2nd September 2012 – Kenneth Gray, Hosea 14 - “Like the dew to Israel”



Hosea’s life has mirrored that of Israel. He has had to cope with the intermittent unfaithfulness of his wife and the disappointment and grief this has caused him. Life is like that for so many people. They strive to be something they are not or to have something that is out of reach and become consumed by the wrong kinds of ambitions for wealth, status, worldly achievements. Lack of faithfulness for pursuing godly goals leads to frustrated ambitions and fruitless lives.

Chapter 14 presents a beautifully simple message: __repent and return to God. __ People sometimes find this message too easy. Surely it cannot be that straightforward. But “Sorry” is enough when we come to God with a true awareness of our guilt and genuine repentance in our hearts.

For the Israelites the big issue was how they, as a small country, could maintain their independence from the larger countries that surrounded them. They believed their confidence was best placed in their sometime ally Assyria and in their own resources rather than in their Sovereign Lord. Inevitably Assyria and Egypt did a deal and in due course Assyria overran Israel. The Israelites’ policy was bound to fail. It reminds us of Chamberlain’s Nazi appeasement policy in the 1930s. Sometimes it is very hard to stand against the mood of the day. In Chamberlain’s day those expressing the need to stand against Hitler were called ‘blood thirsty’ and ‘warmongers’ but were subsequently vindicated when the Nazi atrocities were revealed.

In our day the mood of ‘anything goes’ is compromising standards, attitudes and truths practised and adhered to for countless generations. For example things like the same sex marriage proposal, so clearly subject to the law of unintended consequences, are undermining the Christian principles on which our society has been built. Similarly, the Israelites had the best intentions when they looked to an alliance with Assyria to protect them but the consequences of taking God out of the equation were disastrous.

In this passage God’s mercy and compassion are likened to a beautiful dew that will heal Israel and allow it to ‘blossom like a lily’. The beauty of this image may be a little lost on us who live in Scotland. Having just lived through what has officially been registered as the second worst and wettest summer since 1912 we might find it hard to appreciate the desirability of dew. But for the Israelites whose parched land continually suffered from insufficient rain this is indeed a welcome image. It describes the blessing of God as something wonderfully refreshing that will saturate them to their core and renew them.

This final chapter of Hosea concludes with an array of beautiful images describing the fruitfulness and flourishing that the Israelites will enjoy when they repent and return wholeheartedly to the ways of the Lord.

We in the UK are currently experiencing an extended economic downturn and experts are predicting that we will continue to 'bump along the bottom' for some time to come. In the world's view what makes a nation great is its economic stability and its GDP. The truth is that it is righteousness that exalts a nation and it is righteousness that is required of us. Sin has inevitable consequences. Without repentance problems persist. We only have to look around us to see how miserable many people look as we pass by in our streets. How few people that we meet have the joy of the Lord in their hearts!

The final verses of Hosea are an affirmation that the Lord's ways are the right ways and others' ways are wrong. In his day Hosea was not praised for expressing this truth- he was condemned as a troublemaker. So it is in our day. People pity us Christians and think we are odd and boring because we follow God's ways. In the past Scotland has known God's blessing but we now need to rediscover and pay heed to the prophetic voice that advises repentance.

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Sunday Evening Service 26th August 2012 – Kenneth Gray, Hosea 11 :1-11. "A Much Loved Child"



In conversations with unbelievers Kenneth frequently hears the Bible described as 'full of contradictions'. His response is usually to ask 'Have you actually read it, and if so how often?' which generally terminates the conversation. Many also often dismiss the Old Testament as being all about 'an angry God'. This is a lie. Tonight's passage from Hosea affords one of the more beautiful and intimate insights into just how much God loves his chosen people. Hosea reveals, in God's own words, the tender affection that a loving parent has for a beloved child.

"It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them.' "

How this resonates with our own experience! As human (grand)parents we look out for our children as they learn to walk. They tend to fall over a lot as they struggle to achieve independent mobility. We hover near them and frequently prevent them falling over without their even noticing we are there as they focus on going their own way.

So it is with Israel's heavenly Father. His love is constant and intense like a parent. He sets them up and gives them every advantage yet they stray and go their own way.

We all know parents whose children are heartbreakers, whose wilfulness and badness brings worry, disappointment and grief to their families. Yet even we human parents can set aside our anger and forgive because we love them.

In verse 5 we read that the Israelites deserve to suffer for their rejection of God and that he will weep for them. Israel would become the field of battle were God to withhold his protection.

If God were to turn his face away from his children they could so easily be obliterated. Like Admah and Zeboim that were wiped out with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Israel could sink without trace. When God acts to chasten and destroy the sinful all the hopes, plans and aspirations of such people count for nothing and they become as so much dust. But here God declares" 'My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.' "He loves Israel so much that he will stay his hand because he remembers them in their former innocence.

For any stranger in Israel in those days it would have been difficult to recognise the Israelites as followers of the one true God. Similarly, our land is no longer recognisable as a 'Christian' country. For example a tour of English villages reveals an abundance of beautiful churches dotted across the land but so many can barely support a once-a-month worship service. Congregations are tiny and ministers are frequently forced to share responsibility for several parishes. People no longer wish to worship God – their 'god' has become TV, sport, possessions, career, family. In view of this chilling reminder in Hosea that whole cities and their inhabitants can disappear if they are unfaithful to God, we must ask ourselves 'Who is our God?'

"They will follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west."

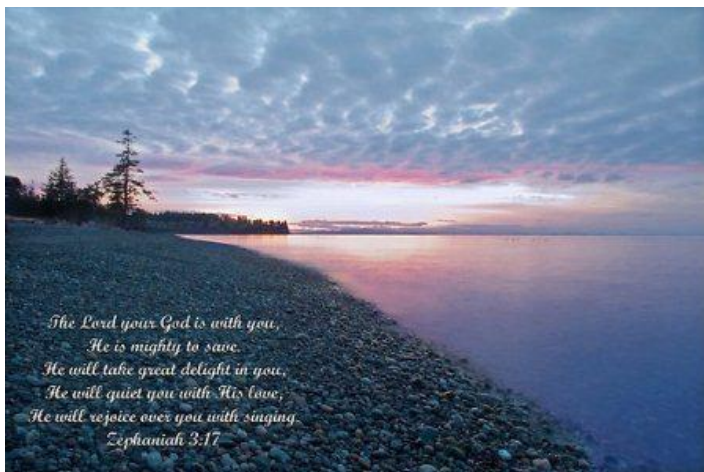
This picture is yet to be fulfilled. As Christians we know that this can only be made possible through Jesus. God will gather us to himself – this is his will, his purpose and desire for his people. Forgiveness and compassion are his nature.

We can draw comfort and hope from Hosea's message and remain confident that God longs for his people to return to him and find life in Jesus. We must rebuke ourselves therefore when we find ourselves treating others as 'beyond the pale'.

As we consider this message that God longs for our repentance and abundantly blesses all who are faithful, if we have never yet fully committed ourselves to him let us each do so tonight.

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Sunday Evening Service 12th August 2012 – Jack McHugh, Zephaniah3:14-17; Romans 3:21-26 "A Song Worth Hearing"



Jack told an anecdote about the love of a wealthy man for his son who died saving the life of a fellow soldier. The story revealed that a humble gardener's respect and love for the master's son was rewarded amazingly and abundantly in the father's dying will. So too, in Christian living whoever has the Son has it all.

Zephaniah, a descendant of Hezekiah, was one in a long line of prophets who also urged the people to repent and to be vigilant in resisting the contamination of sin so that God's

judgment could be avoided . He referred to God as the ‘night watchman’ seeking out those indifferent to and unaffected by his presence. God will not tolerate indifference, he spits the lukewarm out of his mouth.

The day of the Lord comes but judgment is not the last word. God is so delighted to find his people that he sings a love song. He is delirious with joy. In verse 17 we are told" ‘the Lord your God is with you and he is mighty to save’". ‘The last word’ doesn’t need to be judgment. When the Lord comes into their midst he does not come in vengeance with a sword – he comes with a song of love.

So it is for us because Jesus Christ came into the world. God is indeed mighty to save. Save from what? Save us __from__ shallow lives and an eternity separated from him. Save us __for__ a life that matters, full of meaning and richness, hope and value. Free from mediocrity, selfishness and guilt.

God ‘delights’ in us – his joy is full, complete. Just think of it – he who is our judge finds us appealing and satisfying despite our numerous faults and failings. Does God not realise how bad we really are? Of course he does but he sees us through the redeeming prism of Jesus’s grace – we glow under the mantle of the Son’s righteousness and the Father smiles upon us and overlooks our sins.

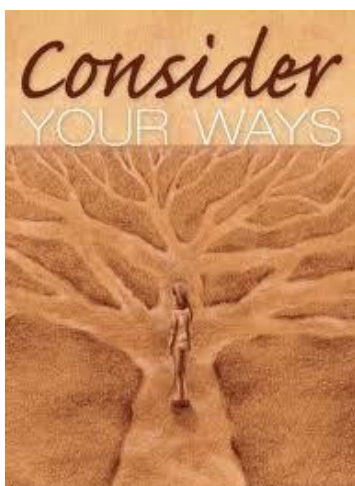
As Paul describes in Romans 3 ‘ ...all have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.’

In Christ Jesus we come to God peacefully, reassured, resting in his love. God will quiet our fears in his love. There is an explosion of joyous singing when God looks upon his good work. We can also join in this song and we will find it easier to put away idols and seek peace and justice and goodness.

A key facet of (grand)parenthood is the clearing up of others’ messes. God our Father calls us, his children, to love him but we so often give him the lowest priority in our lives. God sent Jesus to ‘clear up our mess’, to undo the otherwise eternal damage we have done. He faced and conquered death for all of us. And he did not do this by finding some convenient loophole in the law. His sacrifice was real. He the sinless, guiltless Son of God accepted the role of sacrificial substitute for our sake. Pray that we may hear the voice of the Lord singing that joyful song from now until eternity.

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Sunday Evening Service 5th August 2012 – Derek Peat, Haggai 1&2 “Right People; Right Place: Right Work; Right Time.”



Having just completed our study of Ezekiel, one of the longer books of the Bible, Derek now turns our attention to Haggai, one of the shortest. This book finds us in the year 520BC in the second year of King Darius’s reign. Ezekiel’s prophecies took us to 571BC, 15 years after the Temple’s destruction. In the intervening years a previous Babylonian king, Cyrus, had been the monarch under whom the captivity of the Jews ended in 539BC. In the first year of his reign he was prompted by God to make a decree that the Temple in Jerusalem should be rebuilt and as many Jews as wished to might return to their

land for this purpose. Some 40 to 50 thousand of the exiles had returned to their homeland and the foundations of the Temple had been built. Now, some 18 years later Darius is King of Babylon and the rebuilding of the Temple has been neglected. But it has remained God's plan that the Temple be rebuilt.

The Right People

Ezekiel taught us that God is the Sovereign Lord and that He is the Lord of history and a loving Lord. He had declared a willingness to forgive all the Israelites who would repent and return to His ways. But when Cyrus had permitted the Israelites to return to Jerusalem most had declined the offer. They had grown comfortable in Babylon. However the 'remnant' who responded to God's opportunity were the right people for God's task. These whom Haggai was addressing were not like the sinful people to whom Ezekiel had prophesied. These were willing to carry out God's commands but they had lost some of their enthusiasm for the task and their faith had lost some of its zeal.

The Right Place for the Right Work

God had called his people to the right place, Jerusalem, giving them a common destination to focus on one primary task, the rebuilding of the Temple. The Temple was to be rebuilt to glorify God not to enhance the status of the people. They had sufficient funds available to complete the work but little progress had been made. As Haggai tells them "You have planted much but have harvested little". Their mistake had been to relegate to God's work a lower priority than it deserved and demanded. They had established themselves and focused on their own domestic and business needs first and had applied only sporadic and half-hearted effort to God's work.

What can this Book teach us in 21st century Bridge of Weir?

Are we the 'right people in the right place'? God is calling each one of us but are we too comfortable to respond? The 'right place' for us as Christians is not the temple in Jerusalem. Christ Himself is our 'Temple' and we are part of His Body on earth. We have been brought here to Bridge of Weir to build a Christian community in this place. Church membership is an opportunity to share responsibility together to carry out the Great Commission, to serve together and to offer one another encouragement and support in the task.

Is our work the 'right work'? As Christians we have promised to give our time, talents and resources to God's work. However our human nature often hampers our fulfilling those promises. We find it easier to work for our own glory rather than for God's glory. We should follow Haggai's advice and 'give careful thought' to our ways and guard against backsliding. If we find we are labouring but not prospering in the work for the Kingdom we must examine ourselves and discover where our hearts really lie.

In the book of Haggai God is challenging his people to trust him and put his work first. If they do he will bless them. We must regularly ask ourselves whether we are still doing the right work. Is it the same as what we started or have we become diverted and unfocused? Is it bearing fruit?

Is this the 'right time'?

God's timing is unique and holy. The Israelites began the rebuilding when Cyrus was moved by God to allow them to go home. In the absence of vigilance and zeal evil crept in to contaminate their sense of purpose and it took the people 22 years to rebuild the Temple. We must continue to trust in God's timing and step forward in faith. The blessings that are not yet ours will flow to us if we commit ourselves to serve the purpose of God in our generation.

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