

## Scripture Readings:

### Malachi 1: 1-5

<sup>1</sup> A Message. God's Word to Israel through Malachi: <sup>2-3</sup>God said, "I love you." You replied, "Really? How have you loved us?" "Look at history" (this is God's answer). "Look at how differently I've treated you, Jacob, from Esau: I loved Jacob and hated Esau. I reduced pretentious Esau to a molehill, turned his whole country into a ghost town." <sup>4</sup>When Edom (Esau) said, "We've been knocked down, but we'll get up and start over, good as new," God-of-the-Angel-Armies said, "Just try it and see how far you get. When I knock you down, you stay down. People will take one look at you and say, 'Land of Evil!' and 'the God-cursed tribe!'" <sup>5</sup>"Yes, take a good look. Then you'll see how faithfully I've loved you and you'll want even more, saying, 'May GOD be even greater, beyond the borders of Israel!'"

### Mark 2: 16-17

<sup>16</sup>When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" <sup>17</sup>When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

### Luke 6: 20-26

<sup>20</sup>Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. <sup>21</sup>"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. <sup>22</sup>"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup>Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. <sup>24</sup>"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. <sup>25</sup>"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. <sup>26</sup>"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

## Sermon Text:

The signs of summer are surely appearing. At home the blooms on my rhododendron are about ready to pop and here at

church we are looking at the Sunday school end of term party next Sunday and are coming up to the time when the choir takes its traditional summer break. Advertising will soon be up for our VBS and very shortly Brian will be taking “Go Now in Peace” out of winter storage. I’ll also be disrobing in the coming weeks, which is not as scandalous as it sounds!

The arrival of summer also means it’s time for a new preaching series. The long season following Pentecost is usually when we explore the Christian life – in other words what the Spirit is doing in the church, in the lives of Christian people, now, today – that’s as opposed to the season from Advent through to Pentecost when we explore the great and saving events that God did through Jesus Christ roughly 2000 years ago.

The summer before last, I preached on the book of Acts – probably the best Biblical sourcebook for what the church should look like when it’s moving in the power of the Spirit. I’m sure if you remember nothing else, you remember me traipsing around the sanctuary with the kids stamping our passports at the various ports of call on the Paul’s missionary journeys. The church moving in the power of the Spirit is about *mission* – that’s a big part of what the book of Acts is saying, and a big part of our church life this summer will be outreach-focused, as we continue our visitation to the east side homes, as we collect this gift for Habitat, as we provide VBS for the children in our community.

Last summer I preached on the fruit of the Spirit. That list of nine fruit, from Galatians chapter 5, is one of the best accounts in all of the Bible of how the spirit grows and transforms *the character* of Christian people. And I’m sure if you remember nothing else about that series, you will remember the passionfruit, and the mangoes and the papaya and the lychee and all the weird and wonderful fruit we tasted week after week.

But as well as calling the church into *mission*, as well as growing the fruit of *Christian character* in the lives of individual believers, *the Spirit is given to call the church into all truth*. That’s what Jesus says in the gospel of John (Jn. 6.13). So this

summer I thought I would preach a series **not** on what the church is called to *do*, **not** on what believers are called to *be*, but on *the truth, which the church has to tell*. And you're going to like this series because it's topical. That means we're not going to follow one book or passage of the Bible, but we're going to look at issues: hopefully issues you've always wondered about and said to yourself: "I wonder what the church has to say about that? I wonder how it arrived at that position? Can a Christian be rich? Can a Christian be a soldier? Can a Christian be gay? Can a Christian be different than us – say a Catholic or a charismatic, and still be good with God? What is the spirit saying to the churches on these prickly matters of money, patriotism, sexuality, and how to regard others in the fractured body of Christ. The series is still in the planning stages, so *I want to invite you to request a sermon*. If there is a question you've always wondered about: if it's really important to you to know what the church thinks about extra-terrestrial life forms (I see the Vatican has just pronounced on that one this past week), or if you're wondering if it's alright to be cremated, then speak to me and request a sermon, or drop a note in my mailbox – you can do it anonymously -- but do it *soon*, because I want to plan the summer out in full by June the 8<sup>th</sup> – that gives you two weeks.

This morning I want to introduce the series by asking a more basic question? *Does truth matter? Is God an opinionated God?* Opinionated people are not always the easiest to get along with. So wouldn't it be awful if God were opinionated? I mean, think about it: with an opinionated person at least you have a chance to persuade, a chance of finding a flaw in their reasoning, of winning the argument, but God, by definition, is *always right!* God's *opinion* is the Truth, with a capital T. Well I have bad news: the evidence of Scripture points to our God having strong opinions -- having *a bias*. He is not like our Queen who is bound never to express an opinion in the affairs of state – who reigns serene, dispassionate, the model of equanimity. (Mind you, her equanimity cracked a little this week, didn't it, over the faux pas

committed by her new Canadian relation? – however that was a family matter, not a matter of state. Rumour has it that the Queen rules her family with a firm hand, but when it comes to the affairs of the state, officially she has no opinion). Our God does not even hold it as an ideal to be composed like that. He *contends* with his people; he sends them prophets who *harangue* them on his behalf. In the Scriptures, God is a God who *hates* as well as loves. *God hates sin!* *Jesus hates* above all, the sins of hypocrisy and self-righteousness, as he sees them displayed in the Pharisees. **He is not neutral about this!!** He is not *diplomatic!* “You brood of vipers,” he says, “You whitewashed tombs!”

There are many Scriptures I might have picked today which highlight the bias in God, but look at these three. Malachi 1 is the source for the famous verse “Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated.” Paul quotes that verse in Romans where he reflects on the mystery of the election of the Jews. Jacob and Esau were twins. Why has God made *this twin* and not *that one* the apple of his eye? Why has he frustrated Esau at every turn while he prospered Jacob, quite without regard for Jacob’s righteousness or his deserving? And don’t say this isn’t a question you’ve asked at some point too. Why does God pick *that one* and not *this one*? Why does he single out *that family* for so much suffering? Why does he bless and prosper *this person* when there are many others, equally or even more deserving. Did you hear about the miracle in Charleston South Carolina? This woman, [Velma Thomas](http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=4923465),

( <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=4923465>) was clinically dead for 17 hours and then, as they were about to harvest her organs she sat up in bed, right as rain. The doctors can’t explain it. They are calling it a miracle. Her church had been praying for her to be healed. But what about the millions of *other people* who are prayed for and who are **not healed**, at least not in so dramatic and obvious a fashion? Why did God choose Velma Thomas?

The only answer the church has for this is because **God is free**. No, it’s not *fair* – God is *biased*, but do you remember what

it says in the parable of those who worked in the vineyard for one hour and received the same wages as those who had worked the whole day? (Matthew 20: 1-16). That wasn't fair either but when the workers complained the master says: “Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (v. 15) Doesn't God have the right to dispense his own mercy in the way that he wills? Or are we envious because God is generous?

God is biased and sometimes his bias is inexplicable, but our other two readings from Mark and from Luke suggest that there is some sort of pattern to it. *God is usually biased on the side of those who need something from him, not on the side of those who are self-satisfied.* Aren't these words of Jesus shocking? “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” It's like Jesus is dividing the people in the room: saying “I came for *you lot*, but not for you.” I am a saviour to *these people* over here, but *not* to everyone. Similarly in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus says: listen up if you're poor, or hungry or sad or despised -- I have good news for *you*. But if you're rich or full or happy and popular I have nothing good to say to *you*. When he lived on earth, God *chose* his friends, and he chose to sit *not* with the popular kids, but with the geeks and nerds and pariahs. **Our God is a God with a bias!**

That means if we want to be on the right side of God, *we need to choose where we sit also* -- or in matters of truth, *where we stand*. Some years ago there was a very thought provoking episode of the X Files (viz. “Signs and Wonders”, season 7, episode 9). It was about a woman who was secretary in a liberal protestant church, having fled from a father who was a hillybilly preacher and a snakehandler. The woman gives birth to a belly full of snakes – (now you have to remember this is the X Files, a science fiction series!) – the father is suspected of incest and all manner of crimes. Mulder, one of the FBI investigators has a showdown with him at one point in which the father screams: “Choose! You still don't know

what side you're on.” The last scene in the show is of the liberal protestant minister leading a Bible study. He has appeared as the voice of reason throughout, and has lead the investigation back to the father, out of concern for the girl. He is interpreting a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, explaining to the Bible study group why it must be read in its historical context, why it doesn't really mean what it appears to say. The show sets up this perfect contrast between the hillbilly snakehandler who sees the world in black and white: “Choose. You still don't know what side you're on,” -- and the liberal protestant minister, probably educated at Union Seminary, who sees everything in shades of grey. But when the Bible study concludes, it is the reasonable, respectable minister who goes back to his study, takes a mouse out of his desk drawer and eats it. *He* is the snake, and the father of his secretary's belly full of snakes. He is the satanic one, appearing as an angel of light, a voice of the enlightenment, tempting his flock *not* to choose, but to see everything as relative – all viewpoints as valid.

There is something to be said for trying to get your mind into another person's space, for trying to see the world from their perspective, but when God reveals His bias, when God chooses a side – when God says: “this is truth, that is error; this is The Way, that is the *wrong* way” – then we had better be sure we are on God's side. That is why there are issues in the Christian church, issues Christians have decided are worth contending for. That is why we must speak not only of a Christian *heart*, but also of a Christian *mind*, a kind of *thinking* that is baptized by the gospel.

Is your thinking baptized? The thinking of many people, even in the church, is not baptized at all. We take our cues for how to think about many of these practical, ethical matters from the culture around us, from our televisions (God forbid!), from our *feelings*, from whatever we sense will go down best with our friends and co-workers. Paul says: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12.2). Or as the J. B. Philips translation renders it: “Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its

“A God who takes sides”

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own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within.” Have a baptized mind, a renewed Christian mind, a God-molded mind – not a mind squeezed into whatever shape the world requires. Be a saint, and not a sheep!

Let me leave you with this to ponder: Someone once asked N.T. Wright the New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop of Durham if the world would not be better off without religion. Wasn't it religious people's fundamentalism – their insistence that they had a corner on the truth – which led to intolerance and eventually on to violence? Tom Wright replied that the world would be a much scarier place if there were no religion, because religion, by putting a value on truth, allows us to say in absolute terms “this is an *untruth* – this is *wrong*”: violating your neighbour is *wrong*, because we have also been shown the *truth* and we *know* what is *right*. What may be wrong with the world is just that those who have seen the truth, do not have the courage to be as biased as our God.

Now may God the Father, through his beloved Son Jesus Christ, grant you his Holy Spirit, that he may guide you into all truth.  
AMEN.