

as it should be in our lives and in our world. We need to realise that God wants us to change - not because He hates us, but precisely because He loves us and doesn't want us caught up in stuff that's going to harm us and take us away from Him. He wants us to be His people and we need to respond to that.

This call to repent is ultimately good news. It's the chance to leave behind the stuff in our lives that hurts us, hurts others, hurts our relationship with God. It's the chance to be the people God's called us to be - truly free to live as He wants us to live. It may be difficult... but this could be the start of something special between us and God!

To think and pray about:

- 1) These are difficult words, difficult things for us to hear! What's your first reaction to what John and Malachi have to say? How do you react when we're called to repent?
- 2) Has anyone ever told you something that was hard to hear, yet which you knew was important and would help you in the end?
- 3) Has there ever been a time when you've had to turn away from something you've known to be wrong? What was it? How hard was it to turn away from that?
- 4) Are there any specific things we can do to help us live more closely as God's people?

To think about for our Festival Service:

Read Luke 2:8-20, the story of the Shepherds. Were they ready for Jesus' coming? Why or why not?

GREENFIELD CHURCH

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WEEK 2: Wrong way?

"Wrong way?"

This week's Bible passages:

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6



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Enter John the Baptist...

Malachi

...but we'll come to him in a moment or two. First: **Malachi**.

We don't know very much about who Malachi was. Most scholars think he lived after Israel and Judah had been exiled to Babylon, when Jerusalem and the Temple were being rebuilt. How exciting: God's promises to them that they'd be free in their own land finally coming true!

Except things weren't quite working out that way. Perhaps the Temple didn't look quite how they'd imagined it in their heads. And it seems the priests and Levites, the leaders of the Temple, weren't up to much good (see chapters 1 and 2 for more on this). Bad people still seemed to be getting away with it.

Things seemed to be slipping slowly back to how they were. Israel seemed to be on the skids once more. Where was God in all of this?

And then God speaks - through Malachi. In fact, God has been speaking and confronting Israel throughout this book. Here, He does it for the fourth time. He isn't absent. He is coming - and soon - to deal with the mess, to put things right. Injustices will be dealt with, wrongs righted, evil people put in their places.

But Israel has to realise that it has problems, too. And before God can deal with any of the other issues, they have to turn back to Him, to repent and live as God has called them to live. If they don't, says Malachi, they won't like it when God comes among them. The day they'd been longing for could be very dangerous for them indeed.

Luke

Now back to John the Baptist...

By this point in his story, Luke has already told us the incredible story of John's conception and birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth - you can read it in



Luke chapter 1, verses 1-25. He's also told us the remarkable predictions that were made about him: that he would make the people of Israel ready for God's coming to them by calling them to repent and turn back to God. When he was born, Zechariah joyfully sang his belief that these words were true (read chapter 1, verses 67-80).

Now we see all this being fulfilled. John appears in the desert and begins baptising people - washing them in the river Jordan as a sign of their repentance.

Prophecy fulfilled!

Well, yes... but that wasn't the whole story...

Because yes, John *had* arrived to prepare the way for God coming among His people (which we recognise ultimately in Jesus). No doubt many were delighted to hear this: after all, the country wasn't free, they were occupied by the hated Romans. But at last they would be kicked out and Israel would be free - just as God promised.

But if that's what they're thinking, then John's got different and difficult news for them. If the people want to be in on this, they need to repent and be baptised. Now baptism wasn't a rite for Jews, but for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. It was a sign for their "washing away" the "uncleanliness" of being outside God's people. So if John is calling the Jews to be baptised then what's he saying? That, actually, they're not living as God's people.

And if God is coming to them in Jesus - soon! - then they need to change quickly, otherwise they won't be able to accept Him.

Sounds awfully like Malachi...



Difficult words.. but good news

These words of Malachi and John must've been hard for the people to hear. And they can be hard for us sometimes, as well.

We don't always like to hear that we need to change. Us Christians can be good at telling others what's wrong with them, but ignoring what God might be saying to us. Or maybe their's bits of our lives we don't want God to mention: they're too painful, or we don't want to let go of them. And the picture of Baby Jesus in the manger seems so different from the harsh and difficult words of Malachi and John.

But we need to stop and hear them. We need to recognise not everything's

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