

2018-12-09 ... 10am Service ... Revd Canon Judy Hunt

Malachi 3: 1 – 4; Philippians 1: 3 – 11; Luke 3: 1 – 6

'Change/ Repentance'

Introduction ...

I want us to revisit a theme I've mentioned before:

'I can't help it, I'm just made that way ...'

I wonder when you last said this, thought or heard that phrase:

'I can't help it, I'm just made that way ...'

It could be about an outburst of temper, it could be about seeming inability to get up in the morning, it could be about inappropriate humour ... and so on ...

'I can't help it, I'm just made that way ...'

But is that 'true' ... is it a Christian understanding of character and behaviour?

Today's readings suggest not ...

Malachi 3: 1 – 4:

Look again at the reading from Malachi ... they'll be familiar to some of you from Handel's Messiah.

God's action on his people, God's presence with his people is all about 'change ...

Refiner's fire and Fuller's soap

Purifying ... changing for the better through fire and cleansing.

And then the **Gospel Luke 3: 1 – 6:**

A baptism of repentance ...

Repentance means a complete change – change of direction ... you're heading in a certain direction ... but if you repent – you do a 180 degree turn ... you change.

And then the quote from Isaiah in Luke's gospel ... there aren't many more obvious changes in the landscape than **'mountains and hills made low' crooked paths made straight and rough ways made 'smooth'**.

And the clue to the means of change comes in our **Epistle**. We share in the grace of God. It is God's action in us that leads to refining, purifying, change.

This understanding is reflected in one of the verses of a well-known hymn – Love divine, all loves excelling: the words:

Changed from glory into glory

Til in heaven we take our place ...

Changed – until we're in heaven ... i.e. changed in this life!

Theory and practice ...

'Well' you might be thinking 'that might be the theory ... or the theology ... but does it have any reality?'

Can – as the saying goes ... can a leopard change its spots?

PTO

Isn't it true from experience that we're 'made' in a certain way ... be it from genetics or experience ... and ... are we really meant to lose our individuality and become Christian clones?

That would be one understanding of the teaching, the belief, the aspiration that we're all called to become more like Jesus

... but I think it's a flawed understanding.

Jesus ...

Let me suggest a different one ...

that Jesus is perfect because he is completely the person God calls him to be ... in character, in speech, in action ... completely the person God wants him to be ... and our calling to **'be changed'** can be understood as being a calling to be changed more and more into the person God longs for each of us to be

... and that will vary from person to person.

Yes – of course – each of us is called, for example, to love and to pray ... but how that love is expressed, how that prayer takes place will vary ... we are not clones!

Our character traits will persist too ... but the core ones are neither automatically 'good' or 'bad' ... it's how they are used, expressed ... the change that we are called to is the change for all to be expressed in a Christ-inspired way.

I often ask the parents of a child being baptised what sort of person would they like him/her to be when they are older and sometimes the reply is: **'rich' ...** but I then ask: **'rich and mean' or 'rich and generous'?**

I might say I have a trait of perseverance ... another person might say it's more that I'm obstinate or stubborn ... it's the same character trait ... and I'm called to co-operate with God's grace so that the trait becomes a godly steadfastness.

'I can't help it, I'm just made that way ...'

... Well – maybe you can't help it – but God can ... and being committed to Jesus is about being re-made ... day by day ... so that we can be God's agents to change the world around us ... to bring his kingdom closer.

Amen.