

FOCUS ON STEWARDSHIP 2

Malachi 3:10-12, Luke 6:37-38

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, Sunday 04 September 2016 [MW16-26]

Today we continue our "Stewardship" theme

- a time when we are invited to consider our regular planned giving for the coming year and also come to some decision about this for ourselves
- it is of crucial importance for our own health and well-being
- it is of equally crucial importance for the health and well being of our church
- so let me continue on from last time with our first Bible reading which was from the prophet ... Malachi

Those verses we heard from Malachi

- anyone heard them before?
- do you remember reading or listening to them?
- listen again as I read from another translation:

I am the Lord All-Powerful, and I challenge you to put me to the test. Bring the entire ten percent into the storehouse, so there will be food in my house. Then I will open the windows of heaven and flood you with blessing after blessing. I will also stop locusts from destroying your crops and keeping your vineyards from producing. Everyone of every nation will talk about how I have blessed you and about your wonderful land. I, the Lord All-Powerful, have spoken!

Anything strike you, stand out for you, as you heard those words???

Let me tell you about the first time I heard those verses from Malachi

- I was Vicar of a parish in Gisborne, suburban Te Hapara
- it was an older congregation with a heart for children and outreach
- open, faithful, caring
- this parish had for a number of years run an overdraft
- in those days the Diocese had not centralised its accounting
- so the overdraft was held by the BNZ
- \$4,000 – quite a sum back then when the annual fair brought in \$3,000

This parish was going through a tough time

- it was winter, giving was down, there were repair bills to pay
- so Vestry organised a 'day of prayer and fasting' for the parish
- in the middle of this day of prayer and fasting
- a message was received from the bank saying the overdraft had gone well over the limit and they would no longer honour it
- the monthly payment to the Diocese would not be made
- this was a CRISIS of epic proportions:
- we had an emergency Vestry meeting that very night

I was at a prayer meeting the next day and I asked for prayer for our parish

- afterwards the Apostolic Pastor asked me if I had ever read Malachi
- I did know it was the last book in the Old Testament
- but no, I had never read it
- this Pastor said there was a wonderful promise in there
- and quoted it to me:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

He then went on to tell me some amazing things he had been part of

- things he had seen happen when people took this promise and acted on it

I remember thinking

- yeah right, that might work for Apostolics, can't see it working for Anglicans!
but you know Lord, it would be great to be part of a miracle
- I couldn't see how anything miraculous was likely to happen
our parish was in deep, deep doodoo

We had a parish meeting after church that Sunday

- and decided to have a "bottom of the barrel" appeal
because that was literally where we were, at the bottom of the barrel!
- over the next two weeks people were encouraged to give to this
special appeal over and above their regular giving
- to climb out of the hole and clear the overdraft
and to make sure we didn't go back there

For the next two weeks there was an actual bottom of a barrel in the church

- people brought their special offerings
there was no outside appeal ... it was just us, just parishioners

And you know what ...?

- we went from being \$5,000 overdrawn to being \$8,000 in credit!
everyone looked around in church, looked at each other
wondering the same thing: where did that come from???
- we were not a wealthy parish (obviously!)
we had many people on fixed incomes and no rich benefactors in the wings
- yet somehow there was more in the bank than what people seemed to have given
it was all above board and it was amazing ...

Malachi's words:

Bring to the storehouse a full tenth of what you earn so there will be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord All-Powerful. "I will open the windows of heaven for you and pour out all the blessings you need."

- seemed to describe exactly what we had experienced!

It was amazing

- the whole church was buzzing, on a high
saying to each other, and anyone else that would listen, see what can happen!

Ever since then these words of Malachi have been very special

- sure you can do the exegesis and research
and find out the story behind Malachi's words for the Bible times
- but for me the most important story will always be
the promise Malachi relays from God
and the response of that parish and what happened as a result

You know everywhere else in the Bible it says

- **NOT** to put the Lord your God to the **TEST**

Deuteronomy 6:16 clearly states: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test*

But in Malachi we are most definitely told by the Lord God:

- Put me to the test! Try me on this one – go on, I dare you!

see if you can out-give me!

- apparently there has never been a single person
who was able to out-give God

- and the simple fact is you won't, because you can't beat God on this

A well-known philanthropist was asked, "How is it that you give away so much, and yet have so much left?" "I suppose it's like this," he replied. "I shovel out and God shovels in, and he has a bigger shovel than I do!"

You can't out-give God, but you can have fun trying!

- Jesus says something in a similar line in our Gospel reading

my 'paraphrase' of Luke says something like:

the more generous you are, the more you will have to be generous with!

This seems to me to be a 'law of the universe'

- it is part of the way things work, it's the way God designed things
like gravity and force and motion

- there seems to be a law of the universe relating to generosity:
when you give generously, something good happens in return

I don't remember much physics

- but I do remember one of the 'laws' that goes something like:

for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction

- in our case we could say something like: every act of generosity
releases another act of generosity which is equal or greater

- and so a \$5,000 overdraft becomes an \$8,000 credit

Or to give a perhaps simple down to earth example

- when we moved to our house in Hastings, we needed gates to keep our dog in
we got quotes from two places for simple white powder-coated gates

which were way out of our budget

- we even investigated steel tube and wire

which didn't look as good, and cost nearly as much

so, gates went on hold

Then friends of ours moved house and needed a lawn mower

- having just bought a house, they couldn't afford to buy one

as we didn't have much lawn to look after we gave them our mower
complete with catcher, just what they needed

for a loan, they said, yours to keep we said

- a couple of weeks later, other friends told us one of their family
had a pair of white powder-coated gates surplus to requirement

free to a good home

- coincidence? I think not ...

All of which is intended to remind us that our God
- is an amazing and exuberantly generous God
no doubt about it!

In all sorts of ways our God encourages us to follow suit:
- to be amazingly generous
and so discover the secret of giving:
the more you give, the more you have to give

Why is this important?

- as a church, financially, we live 'on the edge' – just about making our budget
this is not a bad thing
because it means we don't rely on ourselves, we don't get complacent
- it keeps us relying on God and living by faith

However we do need regular planned giving – your regular planned giving

- because we have the desire that our church
will be here for others, as it has been here for us
- we enjoy what we have discovered and share here:
a sense of community, welcome and belonging, growing in faith
- this is a place where many have found peace, healing, a new beginning
we give generously so that others may discover and enjoy what we have
- this is a special place that makes special people
our hope is that this will continue after we have moved on ...
our giving will ensure that it does

Some parishes I've been part of tell you what's needed to achieve the budget target

- and give you a special card to fill out and return
they ask you to prayerfully consider
then pledge an amount to give weekly or monthly
- this morning I'm not asking you to do anything like that
I am asking you to remember the promise of God in Malachi
I am asking you to consider the special nature of our church here
and what you contribute to this
- I am inviting you to spend some time in silent reflection and prayer
then I will conclude with a prayer

[prayer and reflection]

Prayer:

Loving Father, you alone are the source of every good gift. We praise you for all your gifts to us, and we thank you for your generosity. Everything we have, and all that we are, comes from you. You have called us to follow your son, Jesus, without counting the cost. Send us your Holy Spirit to give us the courage and wisdom to be faithful disciples.

Help us to give of our time, our talent and our treasure in a way that reveals our confidence in your promises. Help us to be grateful, accountable and willing to give back with increase. May we be a generous people who are freed from worry and anxiety about the things of the earth. May our offerings, our action and our worship truly reflect our faith in you. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. AMEN