

## An Opt-Out Clause?

Malachi 3<sup>1-5</sup>; Psalm 24; Hebrews 2<sup>14-end</sup>; Luke 2<sup>22-40</sup>

*And a sword will pierce your own soul too. (Luke 2<sup>35</sup>)*

Mary has a bit of a hard time in Luke's telling of the Christmas story:

not only does the 12 year old get told that she is going to be pregnant before she knows what sex is;  
she has to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem so that the baby is born in the right place;  
she has to cope with visitors she has never met just after giving birth;  
and she turns up in the temple to do what any Jew would for a first-born son, she is besieged by the odd people that every Temple or Church has

- Simeon blesses the child, says that he can die happy and then tells Mary that the child will cause her great pain
- and Anna won't shut up about what this boy will achieve. You can't help but feel sorry for her.

What an honest and important lesson for us all to learn about God. It is unrealistic to expect God to fit the universe around our comfort - he knows what he is doing and sometimes our short-term discomfort works out for the good of the universe.

If Mary, the Mother of God, isn't going to get special treatment, no-one is!

The only perspective that ever makes sense on anyone's life is that of looking back into time from outside of time: only then can we see how all the pieces fit together and how some of the painful and sharp angles in our lives are necessary to fit with the lives of others.

False hope is when give God our answers and true faith is when we accept his!

- ✦ Malachi is brutal in seeing things from God's perspective: **The messenger** is coming and **who can endure the day of his coming?** The image of **purifying** is plain enough and the list of the impurities blunt: sorcerers; adulterers; liars; **those who oppress hired workers in their wages;** those who oppress **widows** and **orphans;** those who don't care for **aliens** - together these things are the practical evidence that someone fears God.

- ✦ The Psalmist has that same perspective, declaring the glory of God as the creator and that those who may approach him must have **clean hands and a pure heart.**
- ✦ Hebrews is a strange book in the New Testament: it is probably the record of an early sermon and we have no idea who the preacher is. It tells us that Jesus, in his human life, did not escape testing but that everything, including his death, served God's purpose - **the atonement for sins.** The good news is that **because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.**
- ✦ In the Gospel you can just imagine the young mum being so proud that her baby is singled out by the ancient priest and by the prophetess, but that she also may have wanted to check her contract for opt-out clauses when she hears **and a sword will pierce your own soul too.** Then, with the exception of one story about Jesus' Barmitvah in Jerusalem, all we know about the next 30 years is **the child grew and became strong, followed with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.**

I am sure that there are those here who have gone through things in life that have made them check their agreement with God to look for the opt-out clause. So when might you be tempted to use the opt-outs clause?

- ✦ When you are fed up with God and what he asks? From the perspective of God's time who knows what your discomfort could achieve (as with Mary)?
- ✦ When you are fed up with people (perhaps particularly people in the Church)? If you think that they or it fails in the duties Malachi sets out, perhaps we need to remind ourselves that we are the Church! From the perspective of God's time, he will ensure he always has a faithful people.
- ✦ When life hurts and you want it to stop? Most often that is caused by loss and grief is the cost of love, which is better than the alternative. From the perspective of God's time, there is no death!
- ✦ When you have failed to live by your own standards and don't come anywhere close to God's! From the perspective of God's time, atonement is real and forgiveness is a fact not a feeling!

Today the Church turns away from Christmas and begins to focus on Good Friday: if there was an opt-out clause for that, we wouldn't be here!