

Definitely Half Full!

Malachi 3¹⁻⁴; Benedictus; Philippians 1³⁻¹¹; Luke 3¹⁻⁶

The one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion. [Philippians 1⁶]

This morning we are going to take a little time to look in a bit more detail at just one of the readings. Two of our readings are half-empty readings:

The reading from Malachi is challenging - it tells us that we need to be sorted out, to be purified to be able to stand before God. I would not presume to talk about purifying metals this close to the Jewellery Quarter, but this is an intense process.

The Gospel reading has John-the-Baptist shouting his way round the desert and challenging people to repent - then things get better! This is about our response to God - and our faith has moved on from that: thankfully, it never depends on what we can do!

However, Paul in writing to the Philippians, gives us a very positive statement - definitely half-full - of what it is to be a Christian, and it is this we will take some time to look at:

- ✦ **I thank God for you:** Paul enjoyed being with the Christians at Philippi and the joy that they share grows out of their relationship with God. Make use of the Church Directory to give thanks for each other because we are God's gift to one another. We need to enjoy being with each other in God's family.
- ✦ **Constantly praying for you:** I sometimes come into Church and sit where you sit to pray for you, or I stand by the photo board at the back and hold you before God - and we need each others prayers. Praying for one another deepens our relationship with one another and with God. How do we pray for each other?
- ✦ **Sharing in the Gospel:** We know that the work of sharing Good News is something that we all have a part in. Some stand up and speak; others share their faith where they are in their families or at work; others live out their faith. All this means is that we allow people to see Jesus in us - something we can all do.
- ✦ **He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion:** None of us here are perfect Christians, yet! If it depended on us, we would never get there. But this is God's work - he has called us; he has forgiven us; he challenges us; he will get us there in the end. If you struggle with your faith, relax into

God's hands. The language Paul uses is the ritual language in Greek for beginning and ending a sacrifice. Our lives are the lives that are sacrificed to God and our lives are those that Jesus offers to his father - we can depend on him to do it as DIY sacrifice is seldom completed satisfactorily! Trust God to make us the people that we cannot make ourselves!

- ✦ **You all share in God's grace with me:** At the time of writing Paul was in chains, certain that he would be executed. In the things that challenge us as well as in the things that cause us to be glad Christians stand together, knowing that if they cannot find the strength within themselves for what they need God has provided our Christian family as a really effective support. If we don't allow people to know both our joys and our challenges we deny an opportunity for sharing in God's grace.
- ✦ **I long for you all with the compassion of Christ:** Paul is very blunt here - the word for compassion is one of my favourite Greek words: *splagchna*, lit. bowels! The affection we have for each other runs deep, it is, in the best sense, a moving experience. No need to be ashamed of the depth of feeling we have!
- ✦ **Pray.. that your love may overflow:** Spiritual progress shows and it shows most in the growth of love for one another. This isn't sentimentality, but a practical love that cares and supports. But neither can love ever be cold - it shows in our eyes and in our actions!
- ✦ **Determine what is best:** God thinks that we are worth the best - he sent his Son as the sacrifice for our sin. We should always want the best for each other - and we begin that by thinking the best of each other.
- ✦ **On the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless:** Christian people should live each day so that they don't have regrets. If we have no regrets in life then we can stand before God with a clear conscience.
- ✦ **The Harvest of righteousness ... for the glory and praise of God:** This takes us to the heart of Advent - a life lived in the presence of God as preparation for a life lived for ever in the presence of God.

Do you remember the prayer we used as we lit the 2nd Candle at the beginning of the service?

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you!

Hope - care - love - passion: these are all positive things at the heart of our faith and things that we share together. Paul writes his letter to the Philippians - the letter often known as the Epistle of Joy - from a situation that could have disabled him, and the result is that God and God's people make that positive!

Is that our experience?