



How Can I Lose Touch with God?

Sermon – Rod Harding

May 21, 2023

Malachi 2:1-12

Colossians 3:12-17

John 14:23-27

A few weeks ago, at the meeting for preachers and Bible study group leaders, Ken Kitchin perceptively noted that the church notice board could send an interesting message to the community during this sermon series on Malachi – ‘Kiama Anglican Church – Losing Touch with the Living God.’ And today’s sermon title seems like this sermon could be the title track for the album – ‘How Can I Lose Touch with God.’ So here we are – a double whammy – if you want to know how to lose touch with God, today is certainly the right day to be here in church!

But let me hurry to put at least most of you at ease. If you listened closely to the reading from Malachi earlier in the service, you’d have noticed the first verse of today’s passage, states, *‘And now, you priests, this warning is for you.’* So the ‘warning’ is not for the majority of us – just the ‘priests’, and there are not too many of them around. Just a handful of us who have been ordained as priests in the Sydney Anglican church, of whom I am one, though for our purposes today, you could also include anyone in the church with a position of ministry leadership or teaching. But ‘Whew!’ I hear from everyone else, ‘at least WE don’t have to lose touch with God!’

So who are these ‘priests’, who are copping flak from God, in Malachi’s prophecy? Levi, Jacob’s third son, with his brother Simeon, received an unfortunate ‘blessing’ from their father – *‘Simeon and Levi are brothers – their swords are weapons of violence ... cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.’* (Gen 49:5-7). From the tribe of Levi eventually arose two very significant leaders – Moses and Aaron – and it was Aaron and his sons who would be appointed priests to serve in the tabernacle during the Exodus wanderings. The whole tribe of Levi was, at the same time, presented *‘to Aaron the priest to assist him. They are to perform*

duties for him and for the whole community at the tent of meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle.’ (Numbers 3:6-7). God had ordained them as his own – they would receive no inheritance in the land, but would live on the tithes and sacrifices of the other tribes. All priests, the descendants of Aaron, were clearly Levites, but not all Levites were priests – however, the rest were the priests’ assistants, and deeply involved in temple ritual worship. In an account of typical Israelite moral failure, it was Phineas, grandson of Aaron, who rescued the Israelite camp from death by plague by his righteous action, and was commended by God, who then said to Moses – *‘Tell [Phineas] I am making my covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honour of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.’* (Numbers 25:12-13). So while Jacob’s ‘blessing’ for Levi didn’t sound at all good at first, the Levites, including the priests, became ‘*scattered*’ and ‘*dispersed*’ throughout Israel, where they were provided for by the rest, and honoured to serve as priests and assistants in the national worship.

But let’s also take a closer look at the context of Malachi’s prophetic ministry, so we can better understand what this is all about. Jerusalem had been conquered, subjugated and eventually destroyed by the Babylonians, and the people of Judah had been progressively taken into exile, from about 605 BC. In 539 BC, Cyrus, king of Persia, defeated Babylon and, within his first year, had decreed that the Israelites were to be released from exile in Babylon and encouraged to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. In 538 BC, a remnant had returned, consisting of *‘the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved.’* (Ezra 1:5)

These representatives of the people of God set about their task but, what with the need to establish their homes, to develop the farming of crops and animals, as well as dealing with considerable local opposition to the building program, the temple took more than 20 years to complete – *‘The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.’* (Ezra 6:15) dated as March 12, 516 BC.

About 60 years later (458 BC) Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. According to his genealogy in Ezra chapter 7, he was a direct descendent of Aaron, and with him *‘some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem’* (Ezra 7:7). It seems to be emphasised that amongst this returning remnant of the proud kingdom of Judah were a significant bunch of priests (those from Aaron’s family line) as well as Levites to support and serve them. You could be forgiven for thinking that God’s purposes were being well-served with such faithful Israelites as the Levites well-numbered amongst the rest.

In 445 BC (13 years later) Nehemiah, the cup-bearer of the Persian king, Artaxerxes, in Susa, also returned to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2) where he set about the task of rebuilding the city walls. As the new governor, he also convinced the people to avoid marriages to non-Jews, to keep the Sabbath and to faithfully bring their tithes and offerings. He returned to the service of the Persian king after 12 years, then, when he eventually returned to Jerusalem, he discovered that both priests and people had once again lapsed into carelessness with regard to both religion and lifestyle – he specifically addressed ignoring tithes, failing to maintain the Sabbath, corruption amongst the priesthood and intermarrying with foreigners (see Nehemiah 13).

It is commonly thought that Malachi’s ministry very likely occurred in Jerusalem during the time Nehemiah was absent, given the similarities of the issues both leaders address. The very issues which both Ezra and Nehemiah deal with in their more ‘historical’ accounts are the same issues which disturb the prophet, Malachi, and lead him to pronounce God’s warnings and wisdom in regard to their well-ingrained tendency to ‘lose touch’ with him.

So we return to today’s passage, Malachi 2:1-12. God is clearly at odds with the priests in Jerusalem, as we saw in chapter 1 – *‘It is you priests who show contempt for my name ... by offering defiled food on my altar.’* (1:6-7). God’s condemnation is scathing. *‘If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honour my name, I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings.’* (v.2). You might think you can get away with lack of attention to your priestly duty and your

dishonouring of God, and yet continue to bestow your ‘blessings’ on those you are serving but, not so – your ‘blessings’ will become curses instead. And what’s more, it will be obvious to all as time goes on – *‘I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it.’* (v.3) Kinda makes you glad you’re not a priest, right? Yeah? Well, that’s all right for you!

From God’s perspective, these priests have completely dishonoured the covenant he had made with the Levitical priesthood, presumably a reference to his undertaking with Phineas in the desert wanderings. *‘My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace ... this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name.’* (v.5) This word from God continues to describe Phineas’ response to the covenant offered – *‘True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.’* (v.6).

But unfortunately, that description does not apply to these priests and Levites in Malachi’s time. *‘You have violated the covenant with Levi ... you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble.’* (v.8) Clearly, they have failed in their duty of care and service for the nation, which has a natural but disastrous consequence – did you notice it? When the priests fail in their duty to God, they *‘cause many to stumble.’* That does not absolve those who have stumbled – they remain responsible for their failures – but the priests are also held accountable for their failure in godly teaching and leadership. On the other hand, when the priests are faithful in their service, as was Phineas of old, *‘walking with [God] in peace and uprightness,’* they contribute to *‘turning many from sin.’* The responsibility of the priest is a high one – through Malachi, God says, *‘The lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge ... he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth.’* (v.7) No doubt, that’s why James, in the New Testament, advises his readers, *‘Not many of you should become teachers ... because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.’* (James 3:1) – there it is, the same warning but, this time, more easily understood – beware, you who are teachers (or ‘priests’ of old) – judgement is more strict for you!

The final word in this warning from God to the priests is about as devastating as it can get – *‘I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways’* (v.9) What you are doing represents complete and utter failure of your commitment under the covenant and your undertaking as priests and, as a result, you have ended in public shame and humiliation. Ouch – I’m sure that is not an outcome which any one of us who are priests and leaders would want to experience and, therefore, we must ensure that we conduct the responsibilities of our ‘priesthood’ with diligence and integrity, seeking to honour God in righteousness and justice in both our public and our private lives.

One final and most important comment before we leave this passage (and I’m not going to refer to verses 11 and 12, as I think they fit better with next week’s topic). After having faithfully declared God’s complete dissatisfaction with the priests and Levites in Jerusalem, Malachi turns to everyone in earshot, and says, *‘Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?’* (v.10) Uh-oh! That means that all those of us who’ve been sitting and listening to all this condemnation of the priesthood, quietly affirming that priests like that deserve all they get, or just feeling glad that we are not priests, teachers or leaders and, therefore, not under the same condemnation, are suddenly and very clearly included! We are all children of the same God. God made us all! What God demands of the priests, he demands of us all! So I’m sorry, but the reality is that none of us are off the hook – everything said so far suddenly now applies to us all.

This general inclusion can fall into two parts. First, all of us have a responsibility to not only support and pray for those appointed as ‘priests’ or leaders and teachers amongst us, but also to hold our leaders accountable to the standards and requirements that are set by God for those who serve him and his people in this capacity. We’ve already noted earlier that faithfulness expressed by the leadership is distributed amongst those they lead – many are turned to God – whereas unfaithfulness and lack of integrity in the leadership results in many who are caused to stumble. For all of us, it is to our eternal benefit that

we expect our teachers and leaders to lead according to God’s plan and purpose, and that we hold them accountable to that high calling – which is an important reason for us all to understand what God expects of those who serve in a leadership capacity. If you were to have any reason to question my attitudes, my words or my behaviour, I would hope that you would create the opportunity to raise those things with me – and I’m sure that would also be welcomed by the other leaders in our church.

And then there’s the second way we are all included. In his first letter, Peter, writing to the church, states, *‘You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession.’* (1 Pet 2:9). In the age of the church, from the New Testament right up to the present, it is Jesus alone who fulfils the role of our high priest and all of the rest of us who have become *‘a royal priesthood’*. A priest is a go-between, called to represent God to his people, and also the people to God. That is a summary of our task in the world – it is what God calls us to as his *‘chosen people’*, his *‘special possession’*. We are called to live the qualities of righteousness, faithfulness and justice, reflecting God’s character to our world, as we also intercede on behalf of those we know and love, praying for them and seeking to open up pathways to their understanding and experience of God’s love for them.

I conclude by restating, in a slightly different way, the beginning of today’s passage. *‘“And now, you priests [and that now means ALL of us], this warning is for you. [You must] listen [to God’s warning], and [you must] resolve to honour my name,” says the Lord Almighty.’*

Malachi 2:1-12

2 “And now, you priests, this warning is for you. ² If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honour my name,” says the Lord Almighty, “I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honour me.

³ “Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. ⁴ And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my

covenant with Levi may continue,” says the Lord Almighty. ⁵ “My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. ⁶ True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

⁷ “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth. ⁸ But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the Lord Almighty. ⁹ “So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”

¹⁰ Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?

¹¹ Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god. ¹² As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord remove him from the tents of Jacob – even though he brings an offering to the Lord Almighty.

Colossians 3:12-17

¹² Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you

do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

John 14:23-27

²³ Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

²⁵ “All this I have spoken while still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

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