



DODGY MEAT AND EMPTY FIRES

Anyone here like TV talent shows? I tend to avoid them as I have a serious allergic reaction to Simon Cowell, but there's one show I used to watch a lot when it started: *The Voice*. And it was partly the calibre of the celebrity coaches, partly the suspense of 'will they / won't they turn?' But most of all, it was the ethos of the show:

It's not about the looks – it's all about the voice.

In the OT book of Malachi, the Jewish prophet goes one step further: when it comes to worship, it's not about the looks, but it's not about the voice either. It's all about the heart, and the impact that has on the way we live our lives. It's fascinating that, in a book that focuses so much on worship, there is not one mention of singing.

Which makes you stop and think, doesn't it?

I'm sure we've all heard lots of opinions on worship, but today, we're going to explore what God means by it ...

Malachi 1:6-14

Question: what would the perfect worship event look like for you - if you were writing the script?

A more dangerous question: how many of us feel that our worship as church is falling short of that? (I won't ask you to raise your hands, though – you

might regret it!) The Israelites of Malachi's day kind of felt the same way – God seemed distant and remote, and they were beginning to question whether He even loved them anymore.

So what does God have to say, to them – and to us? God identifies 2 issues – beginning with ...

1) The Problem With Their Worship. What do you think are the 3 things people most look for in church? The order varies according to age and background, but music, teaching and hospitality usually come out on top. And that's understandable, but worrying too. Can you see why? Who's it all about?

Me. The Wii FM ('What's In It For Me?') attitude.

And this is nothing new. Malachi's contemporaries were promising the best of their sheep and goats, but in reality, they were offering any old bit of meat and keeping the best for themselves. They'd never have dreamed of treating their Persian governors like this, and yet that's how they were treating God. Does that mean God is interested in the quality of meat being BBQed on an altar, as if He's eating the stuff? No. But He is interested in the quality of people's hearts – people giving their best to Him, because He has given His best to them (Psalm 50:7-15).

Instead, the Israelites were giving Him second-best. And He was *not* happy (vs6). In fact, He says "Close the temple. I'm not interested" (vs10).

Now, if we look at 21st century western Christianity, we can see something similar occurring. We've taken the consumerism of the world, the 'me-centredness', and Christianized it. At the same time, we don't give God as much of our time / our money / ourselves as we could, because *we* want it. Basically, we're saying, "I'm the most important person in this story." And as a result, church becomes nothing more than "a burden", something we resent, and when we are here, it's all about what *we're* getting out of it, rather than what *God* is.

We, like the Israelites, end up giving God second-best; the scraps from the table; the leftovers of our lives.

Which is a problem, right?

But God also discusses ...

2) The Solution To Their Worship. What do you think are the 3 things *God* most looks for in a church? What was He looking for from the people of Malachi's day?

- The choicest meat, not blemished animals. As already stated, God isn't interested in food, He's interested in attitudes. The key word here is sacrifice. What is this costing us? Just thinking Sunday mornings, we have kids' groups that need leading; we have a tech-desk that needs operating; we have people who need praying for. If you're not actively involved in the life of this church, perhaps you need to ask yourself, "What am I offering to God? And is He pleased with it?"

- The sweetest incense, not empty fires. In the OT, incense was strongly associated with prayer. Twice a day the High Priest would enter the Holy Place, burn a censer-full of incense on the golden altar, and pray (Exodus 30:1-9). But by the time of Malachi, prayer had become the equivalent of an "empty fire", a meaningless ritual, a going through the motions. What about us? Are we meeting with God, and when we are, is it "Thy will be done", or "My will be done"?
- The purest offering, not selfish motives. People can end up doing stuff in church for all sorts of reasons: to prove a point (to themselves or someone else); to gain control; to feel significant and valued; to earn their way into heaven (as if such a thing were even possible!). And trust me; I have to watch myself on this one. But what God is saying through Malachi here is very simple: "Do it for Me. Because I love you. Because you love Me. So the world will know who I am" (vs11).

Now don't get me wrong. Singing is great, dancing is great, music is great (even when we're talking about my sometimes dodgy guitar-playing). But these things are vehicles - worship is about so much more.

And if we feel as though our worship as church is missing the mark in some way, perhaps it's because *we* are.

Give Him Your All

So, what is Jesus worth to us? After all, that's what the Old English word 'worship' means: wor(th)ship (showing God His worth). Is what we call 'worship' really 'worship'?

I was reminded of the story of the pig and the hen, who, on realising it's the farmer's birthday, try to work out what to give him. And the hen says, "I know, let's make him bacon and eggs! I'll provide the eggs - you provide the rest." And the pig says, "I'm not sure about this idea. It's alright for you - all you're making is a contribution. But me, I've got to go the whole hog" (I know, dad joke).

Ask yourself the following questions ...

- What do my sacrifices look like? Are they sacrifices at all? Or are they merely leftovers?
- What does my incense smell of? Am I really meeting with God? Or doing what I do, because I've always done it?
- What is my heart beating for? What's the driver in my life? Is it Jesus? Or is it me?