

# **Followers of the Way**

## **Return to the Lord and He will return to you**

**John 20: 1-18, Malachi 3:1-7**

Today is Easter Sunday, when we celebrate again Christ's resurrection from the dead. I wonder if you've ever wondered why Jesus had to die, and what His death achieved? Indeed, did it achieve anything? The world's very dark at the moment, isn't it, so I guess you might think, no, He didn't really achieve very much at all! But that would be wrong, and to begin to understand, we have to go back to the beginning of the Bible and the Fall. We know that God created Adam and Eve, together and jointly, in His own image, to have dominion over creation – which is another way of saying that God created men and women to look after the Earth. Genesis 1:28, 'God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it ..."' But God laid down a condition. He told Adam, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat of it you shall die." And that was the beginning of the problem because, as we all know, Adam and Eve did eat from the tree, and spiritually from that moment they died; they became separated from God by the wrong choice they had made and subject to death.

And there was no way after that that men and women could restore that relationship. From that moment, the whole of humanity was separated from God and came under bondage to Satan and death. Yet, though we had sinned, God never for one moment gave up on us – and from the first moment Eve sank her teeth into the fruit, then offered it to Adam, God began to plot how to get us back.

The Bible is the history of God's plan for our redemption – a redemption that could be achieved only by God Himself, because it was going to involve a head-to-head battle with Satan. And it took a long time to get everything in place. From the beginning, we know that God chose the people of Israel to be His special possession, so that in time they could become the host nation for His Son. And it was a difficult calling. Yes, God gave them a home – the Promised Land – to be their eternal possession, but at the same time He set about teaching them who He was, and knocking them into shape – which involved a lot of discipline and can, on the face of it, appear quite harsh. There must have been so many times when the Israelites wished they hadn't been quite so chosen. But throughout their turbulent history, God was faithful. He never let them go. And at the right time, when they were ready, He sent His own Son into the world – to go head-to-head with Satan and smash his hold. This was a battle that was costly for God too.

That's what we're celebrating today. Christ's victory on the Cross and His resurrection, which broke mankind's bondage to sin and death and restored those who accept Christ's Lordship to that relationship with God for which we were created. Which doesn't mean we've suddenly become perfect – because, quite patently, we're not, and we can still make wrong choices. But it means that we're now in direct relationship with God and the Holy Spirit, whose work it is to get us ready for heaven, and we no longer have to be bound by Satan. Unless we choose to be.

However, Christ's resurrection wasn't the final part of the story. We're still awaiting the last battle, when Christ returns to claim His kingdom and finally and forever deal with Satan. The period we're in now is a time of dispensation, to allow every man, woman and child on the planet a chance to hear the good news and repent, and escape the final judgement that's to come.

Yet for this time, ahead of Christ's return, Satan remains free to wreak havoc and he still holds enormous power – and he's fighting hard, because he knows, far better than us, what lies ahead.

Satan is the father of lies and prince of darkness. He's the destroyer. Christ, by contrast, is the Lord of life, light, truth, purity, and righteousness. His resurrection from the dead was outward sign of the victory he had achieved. If there had been no resurrection, his death would have been utterly pointless. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:14 -18 '... if Christ had not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain ... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.'

If Christ had not been raised from the dead, we would still be in bondage to Satan. But He was, and Mary's encounter with Jesus that first Easter morning was witness to the seismic spiritual shift that had been achieved by His death. His charge to Mary, in fact, mirrors the Fall. Adam fell because he took the apple offered him by Eve, and they both came under a curse. Eve's curse was that she became subject to Adam: Genesis 3:16 '... your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.' This hadn't been the position before. But by the resurrection, *both the man and the woman had been redeemed*. As a sign of the breaking of that curse, the redeemed woman was charged with taking the message of redemption to men. God does not make mistakes or do anything without cause. Jesus' first appearance to a woman was a deliberate reordering of the Fall, and sign of forgiveness and restoration.

But for now, the devil is still at large, and fighting very hard to retain his hold; and if he can't stay in control, then he wants to destroy as much as he can ahead of the final battle. Just as in Eden, his primary weapons are still lies, perversion, and greed. He whispers to us that men and women have come of age – we don't need God anymore because now we have science, and we're in control. We can improve things ... we can even recreate creation. And he cloaks the ideologies we follow as new religions – and I'm not just talking about religions which deny the divinity and status of Christ, but things such as climate change, transgender rights, diversity and so-called equality.... These are all distractions, blinding us to God. Keeping us under bondage.

In the last hundred or so years, men and women have increasingly listened to the lies, and as result the world has become increasingly chaotic and corrupt. Enslaved to their own desires, men and women have become alienated, rudderless and lost. It seems as if almost every day we hear stories of mass shootings, knife crime, drug problems, sexual abuse and perversion ... all these things are symptoms of disease. But there can be recovery only with the right treatment and, for that, men and women need to turn back to God. It is urgent that we do this. By our choices and behaviour, God has withdrawn His protection, and we have brought down judgment on the world.

Which brings us to Malachi. Chapter 3, v.1, 'See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple ... indeed, He is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears?' Is the time for Christ's return near, or are we about to see an interim, if painful, 'cleansing'? I can't answer that, but I do know that the shadow of the Lord is over the earth and that He's very close. Because of our hubris and rebellion, there's a massive shaking going on, and I believe that things are about to become a lot worse. Whether this is prelude to the final battle, or whether we still have a period of dispensation remaining, doesn't really matter very much. What is important is that our choices have put us under judgement, and only Christ can save us from what's to come.

We do well to remember God's faithfulness to the United Kingdom down the centuries. While we have kept faith, however imperfectly, He has delivered us from invasion, civil disturbance, pestilence and plague. For example, in WW2, when we seemed faced with almost certain annihilation, seven times the King called the nation to prayer, and seven times we saw a mighty deliverance – that could have come only from God. At Dunkirk, for instance, around 400,000 Allied troops had been driven onto the beaches by the German army. Churchill was told we would be lucky if 40,000 could be rescued, and it looked like the war was over. But the nation prayed. One of the problems was that the bigger naval boats couldn't get close enough to shore to pick up the stranded soldiers. But some 850 small civilian boats answered a national plea for help, an incredible calm descended on the channel, and in the end some 340,000 soldiers were rescued, enabling us to fight on.

There are assuredly difficult times ahead. It looks as if our economy could collapse any moment, and we're already facing fuel and energy shortages. There's every likelihood we might soon find ourselves at war – and even if we do manage to avoid that, we're going to see increasing civil disorder on our streets, as certain groups become more assertive, anti-Semitism grows, and the traditional white population becomes increasingly marginalised.

Malachi 1, v.7, "Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts.'

In the crisis that looms ahead, God is our hope – our only hope. The good news is, He hasn't given up on us and it's not too late – but we have to repent. At the moment there's still a window of opportunity – but it's growing smaller by the hour. It is urgent that, as a nation, we turn back to God. When we do, and only when we do, we shall see a mighty deliverance – that comes only from the Lord.