

Last week we focussed on a little phrase written by St Paul: Night and Day we pray...

Of course, if we are having a conversation with someone regularly we soon notice the different moods of the other person. We learn to judge when, and when not, to raise particular issues.

So, the question arises: in our prayer conversation, how *do* we judge the mood of God?

To help us think this through, let's pick out another phrase from St Paul: "...Sharing in the Gospel.." (Philippians 1. 5).

Our thinking can begin with Malachi. He seems to portray a very angry God. In this mood, God does not have a good word to say. In particular, the descendants of Levi, that is, the Priests, are picked out for particular mention.

Malachi was not impressed by what had been achieved by the priests as they returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, or rather what had not been achieved. All sorts of social ills had

been allowed to develop and go unchecked: sorcery, lack of faithfulness, lack of integrity, oppression of workers, lack of provision for widows and orphans, some folks treated as second class citizens, and a lack of godliness. It's a litany of failure in both religious and political terms. Malachi shared with God the anger at the lost opportunities; his God was jolly well going to put things right. Revolution was in the air. Malachi visions a messenger sent by God who will sort things out, oversee a return to the good old days, the former times when things were done right by God. Such action would put God into a good mood.

The irony is that as Christians we have learned to completely mis-read Malachi's rantings, preferring instead to focus on the coming messenger who will prepare the way of Christ, and will change the mood of God.

For this alteration to the role of the messenger we have to blame St Luke. In his Gospel Luke re-focusses Malachi's direction of travel for the mood of God. To do this, in the first chapter of his gospel there is a long story about a priest named Zechariah.

By contrast with the priests of Malachi's day, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were good people. Both had impeccable credentials; he a son of Levi, she of the family of Aaron.

As with Mary and Joseph later on, Elizabeth and Zechariah have a child in unusual and miraculous circumstances. In fact Elizabeth and Mary are pregnant at the same time, and even meet up.

By all accounts as he grew up, John the Baptist was a difficult character to deal with. He insisted on dressing differently, he was uncompromising in his views, and lived in the wilderness away from his family. Similar in some ways to the great painter, Vincent Van Gogh. He was a rather difficult character, too, as I discovered on a visit to Nuenen Museum, last Tuesday.

In the gospel reading today, we heard the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, responding to God's call in the wilderness by proclaiming a forceful message of repentance for sin. The message is delivered in terms of a quote from

another old testament prophet, Isaiah. John the Baptist is still presenting a version of the angry mood of God: God has been angry, but maybe he is softening his stance a little; it *will* help, if only people will respond to God in the right way.

From this curious beginning, as the Gospel story moves on, as St Luke slowly reveals a transition in the mood of God.

This transition is hinted at in the words of the Benedictus, a song composed by Zechariah to celebrate the birth of his son, John. In the Benedictus, there are pregnant phrases: “he has raised up a mighty saviour,” there is also much talk of looking back to promises made in the Old Testament, and much looking forward to people being rescued, forgiven, and a new life of light and peace.

The mood of God is changing, however, the story is looking a bit messy. Reading the first chapter of St Luke’s Gospel, you could be forgiven for expecting that the story of the Messiah was going to be about John the Baptist.

It is against this uncertain background that John the Baptist gets the Gospel story under way with immense energy and imagination.

By the time that St Paul was writing his letter to the Church at Philippi, a lot of water had passed under the Gospel bridge. The mood of God has changed beyond all recognition from that of Malachi or of Zechariah, and even that of John the Baptist.

St Paul displays no fear of God's propensity to lose his rag at every mistake we manage to make. There is no call to repent for those things that have made God angry, vindictive, and judgemental.

The mood music has changed, completely.

The message now is one of gratitude to God, who, has provided a bountiful share for everyone in the benefits of the Gospel, and sees each one of us as: *Sharing in the Gospel*.

We are entitled to ask, What happened?

If, of course, instead of jumping around all over the Bible for snippets to read this morning in order to provide a theme, if we had stayed with St Luke, then we would have learned something significant about how the Gospel story developed.

Firstly, Jesus Christ appeared on the scene, having had a similar start in life to that of John. Jesus is also in the wilderness. The wilderness is becoming a crowded place. Some people are following John, others are following Jesus. There is even a suggestion that Jesus may have once been a disciple of John. The story is in danger of becoming confused. At one point John even sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, are *you* the Messiah, or is there another one coming?

Obviously some clarity was urgently needed, unless the Gospel message was going to get lost almost before it had even started. The correction begins, as Jesus asks John for baptism. This happens, but only after a detailed conversation aimed at both sets of disciples. The confusion appears to end when Herod steps in and has John beheaded.

Naturally, Jesus is badly affected by this event, and he pays a glowing tribute to John's life and work. But John's story does not end there. St Luke still has some tidying up to do to complete the unification of the two sets of disciples.

Buried deep into his second volume of his Gospel, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, is a surprising little story. Chapter 18, sets out the story of Apollos a traveller who joined the church in Ephesus. It turns out he came from a religious community that had never heard of Jesus and knew only the baptism of John. Quite remarkable. Of course, these were the days before the invention of the internet; today everyone knows everything almost before it happens! Back then, news travelled slowly.

St Luke tells us that when Priscilla and Aquila met Apollos, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. When Apollos moved away to a nearby town, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On his arrival Apollos greatly helped those who had become believers, showing that the Messiah is Jesus.

Now the reconciliation of the two movements is complete. John the Baptist's followers are now Jesus followers. The confusion is resolved. Now that the mood music is being played off the same song sheet, Paul writes to show that: you and me are people who have begun to *Share in the Gospel*, with God.

So, the question arises, what mood music do those people you know hear when you share the Gospel with them?

Do they pick up a message that God is angry with them? Does your approach lead them to think that they don't stand a chance in God's kingdom? After an encounter with you at home or in the work place are they left feeling that compared with you they are second class, not up to any good, downright shameful? I once saw a poster of a young lady, dressed for the night club, a glass of wine in one hand, a cigarette in the other, her head thrown back, her long blond hair waving in the wind; the caption read: I don't want to go to heaven, none of my friends will be there! Perhaps she had picked up the wrong message about the mood of God.



Alternatively maybe, the people around you are confused. They know all about you, of course. They know that you attend Trinity Church, and even if they didn't know, they know there is something different about you. But as they look on, are they able to make you out? Some things you do or say may leave them wondering what's going on – and who is this Jesus, anyway? The guy's dead isn't he? How does that work? Perhaps they are confused about the mood message of God.

So what is God's mood? St Paul captures it completely. You and I are sharing in the Gospel, with God. Night and Day we pray for each other. But we have only just begun. God has made a start in changing the mood music with which we can convey to others the clear benefits of life, after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There is still some way to go before we are singing to that mood in harmony, but Paul is confident that God will bring our transformation in mood to completion by the day of Christ. The day of Christ, for which we

live in expectation. The day of Christ when we share with others the saving Gospel of God's Love.

So, today the mood of God is definitely different. No longer the vindictive God calling out in the wilderness for people to get their act together. Now God's mood is to share with people: who may not be perfect, may not always be trusted, and may actually get things wrong most of the time. God's mood is to share with people: who are willing to give life a go; who are struggling to make sense of a life they were given and were never asked if they wanted to be part of; people struggling to come to terms with a limited life span.

Here is a God, who having lived among us, and died a criminal's death, and who raised Jesus to new life, is willing to share his Love with the loveless and the failures. God has begun with us and he is in a mood to welcome the people amongst whom we live and work, whatever baggage they carry, with whatever failure they feel, with whatever limitations life has forced upon them, and without the need for them to be like us.

*Sharing in the Gospel* of God's love is a challenge for us, but a relief for the people around us. God is in the mood to love the people around us, and he wants them to have a Gospel experience. He wants us to produce a harvest of righteousness through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

We are in party mood now.

We must make sure that people, like that lady in the poster, will find they have some friends in heaven on the day of Christ.