

## FELLOWSHIP AND FEARING GOD

### *Malachi 3:13 – 18*

The old children's hymn, "When He cometh, when He cometh, to make up His jewels" has always been a favourite of mine. During a sermon in church, the passage from which it is drawn (Malachi 3:16 – 17) was touched on briefly. As I looked at the passage in its context, it seemed to me to relate very vividly to our CU groups.

The book of Malachi records the message of God to Israel. It is a sustained rebuke: God sets out the issues He has with Israel, explaining in precise and practical terms how they are sinning, and how they are dishonouring His Name. They are offering lame and broken sacrifices, divorcing, holding back tithes from God, etc. But, most of all, God puts His finger on the heart, the fount of a person's actions – the Israelites' service for Him is superficial, casual, negligent, and begrudging – simply because they do not fear Him.

But, near the end of the lengthy rebuke, the scene shifts and we are given a beautiful heavenly perspective of a people who *do* fear God:

*"Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD and that thought upon his name."*

There are many Christians in the Northern Ireland Civil Service – yes, a minority, but still a significant one – but it is a much smaller minority who meet in CU groups across the Civil Service buildings. There may therefore be two groups of people reading this magazine – those who attend regularly, and those who rarely, or never, go to a CU meeting.

There are, of course, many reasons why people do not attend meetings. Some will be very legitimate in the eyes of God. There may also be some reasons like the reasons given by the people in Malachi – false reasoning, and reasons which dishonour God. It may be that some have said to themselves in the words of Malachi 3:14, *"It is vain to serve God, and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?"* Basically, "What's in this CU group *for me*? What profit is it for me to give up my lunch-time, to put more pressure on my flexi?" And because they can see no self-profit, because they have other priorities, because they are unwilling to sacrifice what is precious to them to God, they stay away.

Perhaps some have become dispirited and bitter, and feel that there is no point associating with what seems to be a losing cause, when God doesn't seem to act on behalf of His people, and instead it's the ungodly who get on in life – *"and now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered (Mal 3:15)."* As the people of Israel complain in chapter 2:17, *"Where is the God of judgement?"*

But there's another camp of people – those who can't stay away from the CU meetings, whose hearts lift when they realise it's CU day, who look forward to seeing fellow believers and to hearing things from God that will help them in the challenges they face in work, and to help them labour together in prayer for their unsaved colleagues.

It was of this group of people that I was mainly thinking when I heard the sermon reference to Malachi. There are many CU groups who now count a good attendance as a gathering of 6 or 7, and whose Representative Members face much discouragement because they feel that they are carrying the burden of the work themselves. There must also be retired members who feel disheartened because the numbers have fallen so dramatically from the 'glory days' of their experience.

But Malachi has a word of such encouragement for believers in the Civil Service who meet and who communicate with each other faithfully, a word of remarkable encouragement from the Lord. God tells us that He notices those who speak often to one another. You may not feel noticed as you leave your work to go to your CU meeting, but even setting aside the important observance of non-believing colleagues, the Most High God who inhabits eternity takes note of you. More than that, He listens to what you say when you meet, or talk, with your fellow believers in the Civil Service. And the most amazing thing is that He has a book of remembrance written in His very presence – at the throne of His glory – as a result of the things that you say to one another about Him.

It is certainly true that this relates also to family and church fellowship. But what struck me about this passage was that it says that those who feared the LORD "*spake often*" one to another. Basically, it is hard to do this if we live our work lives, 37.5 hours per week, or whatever our work pattern is, without being in contact with another believer during that time. This article is not about magnifying the CU structures – it is not about the auspices under which believers get together, nor about the size of such gatherings. It is simply a reminder that there is something radically wrong about ourselves as believers if we don't have an urge to get together to talk often with one another about the Lord, about His Name, and all that concerns His kingdom.

The sobering thing which I only noticed as I wrote this article is that it is the people who are bent on fellowship, who can't but meet about God, whom God says He will own as His on the day when He makes up His jewels. On that day, He promises to spare them as a man spares his own son. The merciful thing, though, is that verse 15 of Malachi chapter 3 starts with the word, 'then'; "*THEN they that feared the LORD spake often one to another...*" It appears to be the sustained rebuke in the earlier chapters which galvanises those who belong to God to speak often one to another. If we are in the group of people who have not fellowshiped as we should, there is now the opportunity to demonstrate that we fear God, and that we want to honour fellowship as much as He does. And if we are in the group who do trundle off on a regular basis to meet with other believers, and whose hearts are taken up with God, albeit in a very imperfect way, it is a blessing to be reminded that God is with us, to the extent that He actively listens to what we say, ensures that our fellowship is recorded, and delights to think of us as His jewels in the day when He will spare us because we are in Christ His Son.