

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10

The book of Malachi gets its name not from the author, who is unknown, but from the opening words of the book “An oracle. The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.” Malachi is a Hebrew word meaning “my messenger.”

We know nothing of the author’s life, but from his small book we learn something of the kind of person he was. Despite his attacks on priests (Malachi 1:6-2:4), he was favorable to the Levitical priesthood (Malachi 2:4-7), and he insisted on the people’s obligation to contribute to the expenses of the Temple and the support of the personnel (Malachi 3:6-12). He had a humane concern for the wife who suffers rejection (Malachi 2:14-16), for the people of Judah who wonder about God’s love for them (Malachi 1:2-5), and he was sure that those who wrong the defenseless would eventually receive their just rewards from God (Malachi 3:5). He had a religious sense of God’s honor (Malachi 1:6-14) and of the transcendence which enables God to enforce his will whenever He wishes (Malachi 1:5).

Although there is no way of dating Malachi precisely, it is surely more recent than 515 B.C. because it presupposes the Temple already built, with its regular system of worship functioning.

In our reading today we hear God’s messenger addressing the priests who have defiled God’s altar by offering blind, diseased and crippled animals instead of the unblemished as required. He also blames the lay people who brought them in the first place.

1:14b [A] great King am I, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.

This is based on His universal kingship, transcending the limits of Israel.

2:1 And now, O priests, this commandment is for you: If you do not listen, ² And if you do not lay it to heart, to give glory to my name, says the LORD of hosts, I will send a curse upon you and of your blessing I will make a curse.

The priestly blessing brings a covenant curse because they have not obeyed the covenant.

⁸ But you have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your

instruction; You have made void the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts.

A covenant with Levitical priests is mentioned in Jeremiah 34:21-22 and Numbers 25:10-13; a covenant made with Aaron's grandson Phineas in which God promises enduring priesthood for Phineas' descendants. The Levitical priest was to transmit life, peace, and reverential love, and would himself possess the fullness of what he was to transmit to others.

⁹ I, therefore, have made you contemptible and base before all the people, Since you do not keep my ways, but show partiality in your decisions. ¹⁰ Have we not all the one Father? Has not the one God created us? Why then do we break faith with each other, violating the covenant of our fathers?

Yahweh is the father of all Jews: because there is only one God, a person must belong to the people of God in order to be a part of His family circle. By defiling the altar they have broken the bond of a divine family; a family set up by God Himself.

2nd Reading - 1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13

Having given thanks for the faith of the Thessalonians, Saint Paul now describes his ministry among them.

^{7b} [W]e

Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy

were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children.

The gift of self, which nursing implies

⁸ With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us.

Rather than being a burden on the Thessalonians, the apostles were ready to share with them not only their message but also their very lives. This is the intensity of the apostles' love for the Thessalonians.

"While Scripture is spiritual in itself, nonetheless it often, so to say, adapts itself to carnal, materialistic people in a carnal, materialistic way. But it doesn't want them to remain carnal and materialistic. A mother, too, loves to nurse her infant, but she doesn't love it so that it will always remain a baby. She holds it in her bosom, she cuddles it with her hands, she comforts it with caresses, she feeds it with her milk. She does all this for the baby, but she wants it to grow, so that she won't be doing this sort of thing forever. Now look at the

apostle. We can fix our eyes on him all the more suitably because he wasn't above calling himself a mother. He writes 'I became like a baby in your midst, like a nurse fondling her children.' There are of course nurses who fondle babies that are not their own children. And on the other hand there are mothers who give their children to nurses and don't fondle them themselves. The apostle, however, full of genuine, juicy feelings of love, takes on the role both of nurse when he says 'fondling' and of mother when he completes it with 'her children.'" [Saint Augustine of Hippo (between A.D. 391-430), *Sermons* 305a,5]

⁹ You recall, brothers, our toil and drudgery.

The use of the recall theme invites the Thessalonians to consider realistically the conduct of the apostles among them.

Working night and day in order not to burden any of you,

Saint Paul reminds them that the apostles were self-supporting. In Judaism, rabbis were expected to exercise a trade, but Paul probably made use of the leather-worker's shop (Acts 18:3) as a locale for proclaiming the gospel.

we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

The gospel that comes from God and that proclaims what God has done.

¹³ And for this reason we too give thanks to God unceasingly, that, in receiving the word of God

Literally, "the word of preaching," that which is heard. The word "to receive" is a technical New Testament word for the acceptance of traditional teaching.

from hearing us, you received not a human word

The gospel in no way rests on the authority of the preacher, nor is it effective through him.

but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe.

The gospel becomes effective through God's power.

Gospel - Matthew 23:1-12

Having been questioned by the chief priests, elders, and as we heard last week, the scribes, Jesus now addresses the crowds about their conduct.

^{23:1} Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, ² saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses.

Hebrew tradition, not recorded in the Old Testament, was that the interpretation of the Law was carried on through an unbroken chain of scribes all the way back to Moses. Jesus does not discuss the historical character of the tradition, nor does He question the authority of the scribes and Pharisees to teach. This is why we can speak of the Pope as teaching from the “chair of Peter.”

³ Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice.

What is criticized here is not the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, but their practice; it doesn't match their teaching. “Do as they say, not as they do.”

⁴ They tie up heavy burdens (hard to carry) and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them.

This contrasts with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 11:28-30.

⁵ All their works are performed to be seen.

See Matthew 6:1, 5, 16.

They widen their phylacteries

Phylacteries are small boxes containing parchment on which is written the text of Exodus 13:1-16, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and 11:13-21. These were fastened to the left wrist, and to the forehead in such a way that they hung in front of the eyes. Thus the injunction to keep the Law as a sign on the hand and as a memorial between the eyes (Exodus 13:9; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18) was literally observed.

and lengthen their tassels.

On the four corners of the cloak tassels were worn in observance of Numbers 15:38-39 as reminders of the Law. The size was obviously meant to reflect the magnitude of devotion.

⁶ They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues,

See Luke 14:7-11. Verses 4 through 6 state two complaints: the rigor of scribal interpretation and the vanity and hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. A general statement that scribal teaching was always rigorous would be incorrect. The text deals with attitudes and not particulars, and the influence of Pharisaic theory and practice on interpretation lead to a severe rather than a humane interpretation of the Law.

⁷ greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.'

“Rabbi” means, literally, “my great one” the title had only recently come into use as a technical term for an authorized Jewish teacher-sage.

⁸ As for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven.

Saul ben Batnith was the first known Jewish sage to bear the title “abba” (father). Despite the apparent prohibition of the use of certain words, the Church has always seen this as the prohibition of seeking fame and notoriety rather than a lesson in linguistics. If the use of certain words were prohibited, then synonyms for them would also be prohibited such as “dad, daddy, pa, papa, dada, pop.” It would also have Jesus violating the prohibition when he said “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:7); and also Saint Paul would be in violation when he says “you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you” (1 Thessalonians 2:11). The practice of calling priests “father” can be traced back to the monastic movement when the term served as a method of addressing a spiritual director.

¹⁰ Do not be called ‘Master’; you have but one master, the Messiah.

“Master” is rendered “Teacher” in many translations of the Bible. Christians have only one teacher, Christ, in the sense that they are lifelong disciples of Him alone. Other teachers, like fathers, play a transitory role. Even those denominations who criticize Catholics for calling their priests “father” have no problem with having Sunday school teachers.

¹¹ The greatest among you must be your servant.

Matthew reinforces the teaching on humility (Matthew 20:26-27). From the context it is clear that the prohibition is not the use of the title, but it is of not using the title if it is not earned and displayed in the actions of the bearer. Humility and service to God is what is important.

¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

After our reading today comes the pronouncement by Jesus of the seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees. The seven (number of the covenant) woes are covenant curses which befall those who fail to follow the covenant. In pronouncing the woes, Jesus points out where they have strayed.