

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

31st Ordinary Sunday

First reading:

(Malachi 1.14-2.2, 8-10)

A Corrupt Priesthood

In the three-year cycle, there are only two Sunday readings from the prophet Malachi. He could be called 'anonymous', for 'Malachi' means only 'My Messenger'. The book is printed at the very end of the Old Testament - conveniently, because it ends with a message about the coming of the final messenger of the Lord before the Day of the Lord; this leads on perfectly into the New Testament and the gospel of Matthew.

The book was probably written soon after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon. The prophets of this time show that the enthusiastic return was soon followed by a period of disillusionment and slackness in the performance of religious duties: they could not even get started on rebuilding the Temple. Today's passage denounces the religious leaders for their failure truly to give glory to God, both by their sacrifices and by their failures in moral leadership. Are they really striving to give leadership in celebrating the covenant between God and his people?

The reading is obviously chosen to pair with the gospel reading, in which the religious leadership at the time of Jesus is also fiercely criticized. Slackness in religious observance is a danger in any age, even our own.

Question:

Is the Church in our day becoming slack and lukewarm?

Second reading:

(1 Thessalonians 1.5-10)

Paul's Care for his Converts

This is the earliest of Paul's letters that we possess, and he stresses, as he often does later, his unremitting care for the Churches he has founded around the eastern Mediterranean region.

He seems to be defending himself, perhaps against a charge that he had neglected them. Certainly, the urgency with which he moved from one city to another cannot have left him time to instruct them fully; this is why his letters to them are so rich in teaching for us. They supplement the rudimentary instruction that he gave to them when he was present. Elsewhere he underlines how heavily this anxiety for the wellbeing of these young communities weighs on him.

The vividness and excitement of his letters show how earnest and eager he was. Writing to the Corinthians, at the end of a recital of the persecutions, dangers and hardships he has undergone in the service of Christ and the gospel, he adds, 'beside all the external things, there is, day in, day out, the pressure on me of my anxiety for all the Churches' (2 Corinthians 11.28). Paul's self-defence stands in sharp contrast to the criticism in the first reading of the slackness of the religious leaders.

Question:

What do we expect from our pastors?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 23.1-12)

The Scribes and Pharisees Denounced

This is the fiercest of all the hard things that the gospel of Matthew has to say about the scribes and Pharisees. It introduces a sevenfold curse on them.

The Pharisees were the party of the Jews most concerned for the exact observance of the prescriptions of the Law of Moses. The 'scribes' were lawyers to whom they would turn in the case of a clash between two laws. Their attention to detail and their fussiness often made them lose sight of the real purpose of the Law. However, Jesus was prepared to meet them on the Pharisees' own ground and debate with them in their own terms.

In the gospels, and especially in Matthew, written towards the end of the century, the hostility to this group has obviously become fiercer, no doubt because of their persecution of the followers of Jesus. As Matthew warns: 'They will flog you in their synagogues.' One of their concerns was obviously the status of the religious leaders. It looks as if they were turning into little gods on their own.

So here the gospel stresses by contrast that all the disciples of Jesus are equal: in Christianity, there is only one Father, only one Teacher for all.

Question:

Should we use titles such as 'Father' within Christian practice?
