

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 33rd SUNDAY -C-

Malachi 3: 19-20 Psalm 98 2 Thessalonians 3: 7-12 Luke 21: 5-19

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

For most of us Americans the biblical allusions to earthquakes, wars, insurrections and the destruction of our world order that appear at the end of the liturgical year, always seemed remote and so medieval and “primitive” sounding. Since September 11th these dreadful images, the kind we have in the Malachi and gospel readings, don’t seem as other-worldly as they once did. These description of “wars and insurrections” and the destruction of the seeming indomitable Temple of Jesus’ day sound too much like the scenes that horrified us recently on live television news. What a fright! The seeming indestructible has been an illusion, life is more vulnerable than we have been willing to admit—until now.

Both the Malachi and Luke narratives warn of dire endings. The world as we know it, we are told, is going to come crashing down, suddenly and violently. The gospel scene sounds all too contemporary. People are admiring what seemed like a permanent edifice, the Temple. By the time Luke wrote this passage the Temple had already been destroyed—“there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.” Jesus, a devout Jew, found the established religion of his day woefully inadequate and unresponsive to people’s real needs. The Temple building might be worthy of awe; the worship within it was not.

Malachi in his time also addressed the degradation of Temple worship. On most of the Sundays of this liturgical year we have had readings from Luke’s gospel. (When Advent begins we will start a new cycle, and Matthew will be the featured Sunday gospel.) But the appearance of Malachi is rare in the lectionary cycle and so I thought we would focus these reflections on this little-known prophet and his dire vision.

Malachi is the last of the prophetic writings. He wrote around the beginning of the 5th century B.C.E. He is most outraged by the loss of religious fervor among the people, symbolized by the degradation of worship in the Temple (1:7). The priesthood was lax (1:6-8) and massive injustices existed in the land (3.5). In addition, people were losing faith in God’s governing power and questioned the

seeming absence of the God of justice. They could complain, as we are tempted today, that being a just person and serving God have no rewards since the unjust flourish and seem to go unpunished for the iniquities against God's people. Malachi promises a day of renewal when Temple worship will again praise God and a holy priesthood will lead the people back to God. A purging will happen, a day when evil will be finally destroyed and the world cleansed of injustice, for the "sun of justice" will arise....something people needed and longed to happen.

Malachi warns us, "Lo, the day is coming, blazing like an oven...." The "proud and all evildoers will be stubble and the day that is coming will set them on fire, leaving them neither root nor branch." We will hear this in church this Sunday. I don't know how many real-life evildoers will be there in church, but the oracle is serious enough to stir us all out of a sense of security. Who can feel secure in the face of such a searing judgment? When it is time to plant a new crop the farmer goes into the field to burn the stubble from the last harvest to clear the earth for a new planting. God is going to act decisively and do a whole new thing, finally clearing the world of the injustice that beats down the God-fearers. The oppressed, who have put their faith in God, have waited long for this day of judgment and renewal. Yet, all of us must ponder our own fate in the light of this decisive day. Is this passage just meant to be more discouraging news of gloom and destruction?

Lord knows we have a lot to be discouraged about these days. I write this from a Brooklyn parish a mile's walk from the East River with its spectacular view of the New York skyline—minus two of its most distinctive features, the Trade Center buildings. This is not a pain those here in this parish, nor in the rest of the land, can just put aside and get on with our lives. We get on alright—but not the way we did. Will that evil ever be justly addressed? Will the "sun of justice" shine on our earth and weed out the evil in the world and in our own lives?

Believers in Jesus' church community can ask these questions as we struggle to set the world and even our own church aright. How long must we keep at it? Why aren't things getting better? Will we have to wait till the end of the world to finally see vindication of justice?" Will we ever see things right in our own life times? We can't answer these questions. What the believer must do is continue at whatever task is at hand, knowing whatever is left undone on our part, will not be left undone permanently. Things will be set right, Malachi tells us, God's ways will prevail and be triumphant. Meanwhile, we continue to do our best to counter

terror with courage; to work for peace even now as our nation wages war; to trust in God when so many good people have suffered and died. God is not asleep nor indifferent to our world. Things are not right within our temple or without. But they are not hidden from God, even if God seems to be delaying in rescuing us. Malachi is a reassurance to the believer that injustice will not prevail, for God's day is coming when justice will, after all, be the victor.

What are we to do with Malachi and Jesus' somber predictions that the current order will be dismantled and a new one established in which God is supreme and good prevails? The predictions are not meant to frighten the God-fearing but are a wakeup call, a reminder to review our priorities and tend to what is permanent. We don't have to be prominent evildoers to take these predictions seriously. We can be lulled into the routine of our daily life that requires lots of attention. We may lose our perspective and live as if all that mattered is what is before our face, what requires attention now. Some may even lose sight of God while focusing on self-interest, as if that were all that mattered. But Malachi is a helpful warning that stubble will be burnt away.

For those who have feared God, kept faith and even endured hardship Malachi brings good news for the "sun of justice" will arise "with its healing rays." If one sees Jesus as this just "sun/Son" then his rays will bring renewal of heart, spirit and mind. He will also be the one to renew the Temple by announcing God's Word of reconciliation. He will teach us true worship and praise for he will be the truly holy high priest. Indeed, he himself will be the renewed temple, the holy place in whose presence we meet and worship God.

QUOTABLE:

ONE

As the soot and dirt and ash rained down,
we became one color.

As we carried each other down the stairs
of the burning building,
we became one generation.

As the firefighters and police officers
fought their way into the inferno

we became one gender.

As we fell to our knees
in prayer for strength,
we became on faith.

As we whispered or shouted words of encouragement,
we spoke one language.

As we gave our blood in lines a mile long,
we became one body.

As we mourned together the great loss
we became on family.

As we cried tears of grief and loss,
we became one soul.

As we retell with pride
of the sacrifice of the heroes
we become one people.

We are
One color
One class
One generation
One gender
One faith
One language
One body
One family
One soul
One people.

-----Cheryl Sawyer

JUSTICE NOTES:

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

A live-and-let-live ethos is not up to addressing some of the major social questions we face today. Specifically, it cannot address the struggles of poor African Americans in urban centers. The populations of the inner cores of many large American cities are heavily African American, and they are mostly poor. Their lives are marked by economic deprivation, unemployment, single parenthood, homelessness and frightening drug-related violence. Tolerance alone cannot produce an adequate response to these realities. For the following reasons we need a stronger vision of the common good to address them.

First, most middle-class Americans live in neighborhoods that isolate them from people of significantly different socioeconomic backgrounds. This isolation is due to the apparently impersonal forces of the real estate market, but it is sustained by zoning laws and other boundaries that result from political choice rather than geography. To challenge these divisions requires an understanding of the common good that reaches beyond the boundaries between homogeneous groups of the like-minded, and between the middle-class and the very poor.

Second, pursuit of community by middle-class Americans often takes forms that deepen the crisis of the inner cities. Suburbanites today often live in what Robert Bellah has called "lifestyle enclaves." People in such enclaves find their identities in interaction with other persons with similar patterns of appearance, consumption and leisure. These communal relationships are based on some feature of private rather than public life. The bonds they forge are more like those among members of the same club than among fellow citizens concerned for the good of the wider community. So, the need for community, when expressed in suburban lifestyle enclaves, can lead to the construction of walls and moats in the form of bigger and better malls and tougher zoning ordinances. These strengthen the locks on the growing number of gated communities that protect the privileged from the poor.

Third, increased racial tolerance among white suburbanites is not the master key that will unlock the doors that keep the poor of the inner city from sharing in the national well-being. Socioeconomic class differences between suburb and inner city are more important in sustaining these boundaries than are negative racial attitudes. To be sure, racial prejudice continues to be an operative force in

American life. But it is also clear that overtly racist attitudes have notably declined over recent decades. This attitudinal change has not been accompanied by an improvement in the situation of blacks who live in the inner city. African Americans at the lower end of the economic spectrum continue to live in dire straits; nearly 10 million live in poverty. This is close to 25 percent of the black population in the United States. Blacks are 2.6 times more likely to be poor than are European Americans. Hardest hit are black children.

...We live in a dangerously divided nation. If we are to begin the task of securing minimal justice, we need to overcome these divisions. The urban poor are citizens of the American republic, and we have a duty to treat them as such. To begin doing so, we need a renewed commitment to a good that must be there for us all if it is to be there for any of us. When we begin to take steps toward this shared good, we will be on a path marked out for us by the deepest traditions of Western and Christian thought. We will be on the path toward an American public life healed of some of its deepest wounds and on the way to a new realization of the good that is common.

----David Hollenbach, S.J., **“The Common Good and Urban Poverty.”**
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