

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 33<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

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

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The prophet Malachi is a mysterious figure. His name means “my messenger,” but we are not sure who he was or when he wrote—possibly after the dedication of the temple in 515 B.C.E. If we don’t know anything about this anonymous prophet then, what do we have?...Just what his name suggests—the focus isn’t on his personality, it is on his message. Reading his writings we see that besides priestly concerns about proper worship, he is also concerned about justice (3:15). Though the people are established and worshipping in an adorned and monumental temple, Malachi shouts out a message of warning about their inadequate worship and, in the section from which today’s reading is taken (3:13-4:3), the prophet confronts those who question the justice of God and claim evildoers prosper.

Malachi casts a frank appraisal on the world and (we would probably join him here) admits that yes indeed, evil does do prosper but only in the present time. Therefore, we should not be seduced by appearances, quit doing what is right and join those who act as if God does not really notice. God does, Malachi warns, and at some time in the future, God will finally and fully establish justice. He announces the coming of “the Day” (cf. also 3:2-4) when God will overcome the darkness of sin with the light of the “sun of justice.” On that “day” the righteous will be rewarded and evildoers punished. The faithful who hear his message that, though evil and injustice seem firmly established in our world and the faithful feel vulnerable and insignificant facing the daunting forces of war, political and social corruption, economic inequality, etc.,—nevertheless, Malachi assures us, God is not asleep or indifferent to the plight of suffering. God, he says, is going to have the final word that will set things right.

As we can tell by the change of tone the readings have taken these last weeks, the liturgical year is coming to an end. The scriptures remind us that we know the side God has taken and hence present inequalities will end. Thus, as we wait for God’s resolution, we continue, as best we can, to live faithful lives, obey God’s will and serve on God’s side against injustice. After all, hasn’t, in fact, the “sun of justice” already shone on us and illuminated our path?

In the early church, the destruction of the temple was seen as a sign that the end was near; that the prophecies about “the Day” foretold by prophets like Malachi, were coming to fulfillment. Jesus also speaks about the end, but says before that day, there will be those claiming to be the messiah (“...many will come in my name, saying ‘I am he’”); “wars and insurrections” and natural cataclysms. Disciples must not be turned aside or overcome with fear, for the end is not yet. Before the end, still more will happen to the faithful. They will suffer at the hands of religious and civil authorities and be handed over by their own family members. Some will even be put to death. How much worse can things get for Jesus’ followers? Everything structural and familial from which one would expect to receive support will collapse or turn against them. He assures them, however, that at these most trying times they will not be on their own, for they will be given the words they need.

Have you heard of the “Left Behind” series? Since 1995 there have been eleven episodes selling over 40 million copies. The books are based on an interpretation of the Book of Revelation—today’s gospel sounds like it came from Revelation with all its talk about destruction, earthquakes and travail. A central feature of the “Left Behind” series is the Rapture, when, it is claimed, the good will be taken up by Christ into the heavens while the vast majority of humanity will be left behind. Then, after the Rapture, the Anti-Christ will reign on earth. There will be wars, vast destruction, plagues and famine. For those “left behind” there will be horrible suffering, a punishment for evildoers. Does the series confirm Malachi’s “blazing like an oven” image or is this what Jesus is suggesting the future will be like? (For more on the “Left Behind” series for preaching, see PREACH magazine (December 2004).

Jesus is asked about the sign that will inaugurate the day when the temple will be “thrown down.” When some contemporary interpreters look at the kind of scriptures Malachi and Luke present to us today, they take them quite literally. The “Left Behind” series is just one example. But in our tradition, we interpret these texts as metaphors, and we search for their meaning for our present lives. At the least, when we are discouraged with the weary and faulty state of our world and are tempted to conclude that evil has the upper hand, readings like today’s encourage us not to yield to despair. Even if we must suffer for the cause of right, we can trust that God will stand with us and eventually God’s way will prevail. In fact, Jesus tells us, our very suffering for his name will be an opportunity to

witness to him until the Day of the Lord comes to set things right.

After the descriptions of the dire consequences the disciples will suffer for following Christ, there is a seeming contradiction. “...but not a hair of your head will be destroyed.” How can Jesus speak that illogical statement? —it just doesn’t follow from what he just said! That seeming contradiction is a good clue that we are not to take these texts literally. What we do hear though is that God will be the final protector of the righteous. Our fate is in God’s hands.

We live in the in-between time. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection have inaugurated the end time. But we do not know when things will finally come to an end. Who knows how it will come and how far off it is? But in the meantime, it is clear from today’s gospel that we have work to do: to witness our faith in Jesus, despite the consequences and to trust that God will be with us in the doing and the waiting time.

Many have already experienced the predictions Jesus made to his disciples. Closer to home, our private worlds also collapse and bring suffering to us. When all around everything is falling apart and our usual supports are no longer there for us, what are we to do? Jesus’ words today are addressed to our private endings when we are under stress and pain. He calls us to be faithful. Such fidelity not only firms our trembling legs and spirits but also serves as witness to others how faith in Christ can sustain disciples. As Jesus puts it, in such dire straits, we have an opportunity to give testimony. What feels like a very personal and solitary pain, can nevertheless, be a powerful witness to God’s strength working in us, building up others in the faith community.

Haven’t we been the recipient of powerful testimony from those who remain faithful in what appears to us, as terribly stressful times? Think of the witness of those suffering poor health, the loss of a loved one, a debilitating disease, unemployment, etc. We are encouraged by their witness. God, we reason correctly, has stood by them in situations that would have tempted anyone’s faith. Thus, God will not desert us if we experience similar crises.

It is clear from Luke’s scheduling today that we are living in the in-between time (vv. 12-19). Jesus tells us in the last line of our passage, “By your perseverance you will secure your lives.” So, are we left on our own to “tough it out” until we

have gotten through this time of trial? No, and that is why we are here for eucharist today, because we know this is the food that sees us through for the long haul and will sustain us whatever may befall us—or is already upon us-- stressing our faith.

## **ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER**

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT, by Raymond E. Brown.  
New York: Doubleday, 1997 (\$42.50).

Here is an introductory book written by a top Roman Catholic biblical scholar for beginners. Brown envisions that his audience is composed of college students, or seminarians, as well as members of bible discussion groups. He has intentionally written so as not to overwhelm or scare away the neophyte. If you want to get a general introduction to the New Testament, you couldn't do better than this book.

## **QUOTABLE**

“Lo the day is coming” [from the first reading]

Though his writings were [brief], Malachi was important enough to be quoted by Jesus to clarify the role of John the Baptist (see Malachi 3:1 and Matthew 11: 10) as the messenger of preparation for judgment.

And the day of judgment is coming, Malachi insists. Those who fear God will come out ahead of those who surrender to a skeptical and uncommitted age. So how does one prepare for the judgment? My Pentecostal friends in college would make us laugh by staging a “rapture drill,” referring to the belief that the Second Coming of Christ would include a snatching up to the heavens of those who were saved before the destruction of the earth. During this drill, my friends would stand with their arms raised, waiting to be “snatched up.” The point of the humor was, of course, that one cannot prepare for such an unearthly event, that the real test of readiness is the way we live in relationship to God and others every day.

-----Alice L. Camille, GOD’S WORD IS ALIVE!: ENTERING THE SUNDAY READINGS. (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications), 1998. ISBN0-89622-926-2, page 352.

## JUST COFFEE

Some people think that doing something positive for a just cause can be very involved or time consuming. But there are many daily ways we can act for justice that don't take much time and effort and can become just part of our routine----like drinking a cup of coffee.

There is currently an international effort to get people to drink "Fair Trade Coffee." Small farmers supply as much as 70% of the world's coffee and most receive very little for their efforts. (On a \$3 latte a small farmer gets 2 cents.) In recent years, coffee prices have dropped. Desperate to sell their crops, these small farmers often must settle for 15-20 cents a pound, while their coffee goes through a string of coffee sellers each taking a profit on the sales. Coffee companies like Starbucks have made large profits from the low prices. But small farmers haven't. Prices have dropped so much that in places like Kenya and Central America crops are left to rot on the coffee bushes.

As a result, small coffee farmers around the world are going into debt and are forced to sell their lands. Coffee co-ops have been formed to help these small farmers sell their coffee more directly, thus eliminating the middlemen's profits and increasing the amount the farmers earn. These co-ops also lend help for child nutrition, install pumps for clean water into communities and give support in times of crisis.

Parishes and dioceses around the country have been ordering Fair Trade Coffee from Equal Exchange ([www.equalexchange.com](http://www.equalexchange.com) Or call 410-951-7459) and through Catholic Relief Services ([www.CRSFairTrade.org](http://www.CRSFairTrade.org) Or call 410-951-7459). You can buy Fair Trade Coffee in your supermarkets. Next time your order a cup of coffee at your favorite coffee stop, why not ask them if they are serving Fair Trade Coffee---if not, why not?

—information gathered from "The Catholic Voice," the Oakland, Ca. diocesan newspaper, 9/20/2004.

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Angel Guevara                      #0506556    (On death row since 6/20/96)
- David K. Williams                #0440399    (7/23/95)
- Walic C. Thomas                  #0405380    (8/9/96)

-----Central Prison    1300 Western Blvd.    Raleigh, NC    27606