**THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**

**13th November 2022**

**First Reading Malachi 4:1-2**

We do not know the name of the prophet Malachi, which in Hebrew simply means "My Messenger," Nor is it known when he lived for there are no historical references within his writing. It is therefore impossible to place his prophecies in context. But this does not matter much for the present reading, since it is timeless— a warning that the day of the Lord is coming which spells doom for all the arrogant and evildoers.

The book is strongly influenced by Deuteronomy and is preoccupied with the cultic faults of priests (1:6-2:9) and people (3:6-12). But for those who respect the name of God, that day will mean vindication and salvation, beautifully described as the rising of the sun of righteousness with healing in its wings. This phrase, Charles Wesley applied to the birth of Christ in his Christmas hymn.

Risen with healing in his wings

Light and life to all he brings,

Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!

Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!

Taken in this sense, the reading strikes two notes. One is the future Advent of Christ as Judge, and the other is the past Advent in his Nativity. The end of the old Church year dovetails with the beginning of the new.

In the perspective of Malachi, however, the last judgment is as positive (the rising of the sun with healing in its wings) just as much as it is negative (the warning to the arrogant and evildoers). Our common use of the word Judgement is disproportionately negative. We associate it with guilt and punishment but we forget that one can be declared innocent by a court and liberated. In Christian use, it is even the guilty who are declared innocent!!! It is therefore to be celebrated by those who are to benefit.

Karl Barth once protested that for many Christians the last judgment had become a dire expectation of doom (think of the Dies Irae! which begins ‘That day is a day of wrath, with earth in ashes’) But, we should bear in mind that the New Testament Christians looked forward to "that day" with joy, waiting for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of the Lord (2 Peter 3:11-13). (Karl Barth was a Swiss Calvinist theologian. b. 1886 d. 1968)

**Second Reading 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12**

One of the strongest themes of the early Christian preaching was the return of the Lord to earth, from where he would escort his followers to heaven. (John 14;3) Some Thessalonian Christians heard on their social media (Mark 1) that he had already landed elsewhere and they were waiting for him to reach Thessalonica. The curse of having to work (Genesis 3;17-19) had therefore been lifted. They could therefore eat, drink, and be merry.

In his first letter, Paul had already exhorted the Thessalonian Christians to take pains to earn their living so that they would command the respect of outsiders and be dependent on nobody. (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). The situation as reflected in the second letter, written about six months later, seems to have shown no improvement. Paul is forced to express himself more severely 'Anyone unwilling to work should not eat' (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

**Gospel: Luke 21:5-19**

Apocalyptic used to be a recognised literary genre which has not survived to our own age. Therefore what we now read is widely misunderstood. The Revelation of John is our principal experience of Apocalyptic but smaller examples also occur in passages such as to-day’s Gospel reading.

The apocalyptic author would take contemporary events and retell them using mythological images or heightened language. He was making connections between the events of this human world and the invisible world of the divine, thus demonstrating their supernatural importance. Contrary to popular wishful thinking, Apocalyptic does not predict the future but interprets contemporary events as divinely inspired. These events were presented as part of the last crisis of human history, and would be followed very soon by its consummation.

With this in mind, it is impossible to read to-day’s Gospel passage without visualising the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. By contemporary standards the destruction was far greater and more complete than any precedent. The reason was that for a hundred years the Romans had largely allowed free religious practice in Judaea out of respect for Jewish single-mindedness. But by 66 A.D. friction between Jews and Gentiles combined with oppressive taxation and unwanted imperialism, culminated in a Jewish rebellion. At first, it was successful. Jewish forces quickly expelled the Romans from Jerusalem, and a revolutionary government was formed.

Nero could not tolerate such ingratitude and sent the general Vespasian to crush the revolt with exceptional brutality. For Christians, it must have seemed to presage the end of civilisation.

Luke handles two distinct themes. One is historical - the destruction of Jerusalem and the victory of the gospel. The other is eschatological - the end of this age and the Parousia of the Son of man.

All three paragraphs in the Missal reading are conscious of situations in the decade following the city’s destruction. Jews and Christians were indiscriminately expelled from the countryside around Jerusalem and many faced criminal charges. Luke wrote as he did to stiffen the resolve of those caught in the cross-fire. Christianity was seen by authority as a clandestine society, newly sprung from the lower classes and therefore a useful scapegoat to divert attention from unrelated systemic faults.

By his addition of the phrase 'the time is near' (v. 8) Luke strengthens the warning against false messiahs who also preached that the end of the epoch is imminent. The phrase *'The end will not follow immediately*' (v. 9) is a stronger expression than Mark's (13:7) and emphasizes the delay of the Parousia: these events precede the fall of Jerusalem but they do not herald the End.

Luke’s link *'Then he said to them*,' marks a transition from the warnings of vv. 8-9 to the prophetic passage which follows; Luke adds *'plagues,' 'portents and great signs from heaven*,' and omits Mark's *'This is but the beginning of the birth pangs*' (Mark 13:8) This is because he sees the beginning of the end in the persecution of the disciples (vv. 12-19).

The language consciously echoes traditional Old Testament images of disaster and could well be applied to the destruction of Jerusalem, seen as a divine intervention and as a prefiguration of the end of the world. But of equal concern to Luke is the persecution his readers must first face.

Luke omits Mark 13:10 (*'and the good news must first be preached to all nations'*) It could be that by the time Luke wrote Paul had succeeded in visiting Spain which was considered the 'the end of the earth' (see Romans 15;24 & 28)

The eloquence and wisdom mentioned near the end of the reading recalls the martyr Stephen. (Acts 6;10) It is Christ himself (or in Mark 13:11 - the Holy Spirit) who will inspire the disciples - their victory will be really his. The world's hate, and martyrdom for some, will be their fate, yet they must remain confident (vv. 16-17).