

St. Paul's Parish, Kent
The Twenty-fifth Sunday After Pentecost, 18 November 2008
The Reverend Allen LaMontagne

Revised Common Lectionary Proper 28C: Malachi 4.1-2a; Psalm 98; 2 Thessalonians 3.6-13; Luke 21.5-19

When we come to passages such as we have today in which bad things happen to good people, I usually find myself asking, who are the good guys and who are the bad? Especially, when I see this ancient text in modern light, who is the betrayer, and who is betrayed? Who is the persecutor and who is persecuted? When I read Jesus' words, "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death," I imagine loud voices declaring the rightness of a position; both sides arguing to make a case, screaming to make a point, as though victims of the other.

Who is right? Who is wrong? Who is telling the truth? Who is misguided, or outright lying?

Some people who claim to follow Christ say we are the victims of Islamic aggression. They neither look for or see any wrongdoing among Christians ourselves. Understanding the world this way is pretty simple. People who wear cloth on their heads, whose language is different, their skin color different, their food habits and prayer practices different, who read different Scriptures--some of whom may be good people, but at the heart of these different people is a fundamental defect, it is said. They are violent, it is believed; worse, they are violent religiously--as though they are, and we are not. We may be sometimes, but only because they are first, and therefore we have to be.

It's said that you can find in the Koran words which speak of being violent toward others. Inflammatory words like, "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, and dashes them against a rock." Smash the brains out of the children of enemies... Can anything in a holy book be more horrifying? Do you know that verse? It comes from Psalm 137 in the Holy Bible.

Of Malachi, not a lot is known other than that he fits the bill of a prophet. In the short book attributed to him, the last of the Hebrew Scriptures--kind of a gateway to the New Testament--there is rare insight on the God of all nations. The chosen people have among them those who do wrong. The offerings made are actually a holding back of what is best. Even though as we say, "All things come of thee O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee," and knowing that God gives freely the best the land has to offer, in Malachi's world some of what is given in return to God as a thank offering are things completely unacceptable for the purpose of sacrifice--animals blind and lame, as though God is blind to see how inferior the gift. It is not a sacrifice to give away what is essentially undesirable. That is convenience, ridding oneself of what is tossed aside anyway, while the best is kept for oneself.

In contrast to this behavior, Malachi says, the gentiles fear the Lord. In the first chapter

of Malachi, God says to the priests and people of Judah, "You bring what is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept this from your hand? says the Lord. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished; for I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name is feared among the nations..."

How are we to interpret this passage? Who is who? And where are we in it? In Malachi, are the Jews the bad guys, and the gentiles the good guys? But then what of the Book of Joshua, when the people of Israel conquer the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, and more....(I just picked the names of the tribes I could pronounce easily...) are the people of Israel then the good guys and the bad guys those they conquer...?

"See the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings."

Who is getting burnt to a crisp, and on whom is the sun going to rise, with healing in its wings? Millions of Jews guilty only of being Jews were murdered and burned by Hitler. The Japanese homeland during World War II, where civilians lived under the oppressive rule of Hirohito, was bombed into a fiery hell by us; Vietnam burned with napalm. The Twin Towers burned with jet fuel. More recently, the forests of California burned, the homeless lost what they already didn't already and the rich lost what insurance will replace. **Who are the good and who are the bad? Do we know anymore? Have we ever really known?**

Do you get confused with the Bible, the ways it seems to be used by some to support our violence, but condemns the violence of others, "their" holy writ, "their" actions...ours don't get the same scrutiny. Why is this? Is it because we try to be God, instead of following the ways of God?

Until we see ourselves and others as having more in common than not, until we love our enemies as ourselves, we can plan on there being more days, burning like an oven, when all arrogant and evildoers and a lot of innocents will be stubble, and in that day it may not be any more apparent than it is now or ever was, who is good and who is bad. It will just be another day in which people kill other people for one reason or another, one side prevailing one day, another group enjoying the spoils of war the next...until people of faith, even when we hear of wars and insurrections, are not terrified; when we are quick to listen, and to inquire what wrong there is, that we might reason together, as people of faith, people of every nation, race and creed. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox." (Isa. 65:25a)

"Brothers and sisters, be not weary in doing right." (2 Thess. 3:13) There is much yet for us to learn in holy Scriptures, in life, in ourselves, in our enemies, and others. "Grant us so to hear all holy Scriptures, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life," and share it with the

entire world, in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
Amen.