

Turning Hearts

In the name of him who is coming to judge the earth, dear friends in Christ: Today's first reading comes from the last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament. In that sense it is the final word of the Lord to his people before the first coming of Christ much like the last chapters of Revelation, the New Testament's last book, is the final word of the Lord until the second coming of Christ. Not coincidentally, both books end on the same note: the Lord warning of a coming Day of Judgment, which will bring fire and fury for some and liberation and joy for others. Therefore watch. Wait. Be ready; lest that Day catch you unaware and unprepared.

That would be bad, as the Lord describes through Malachi "a day burning like an oven" in which those who are not ready will be set ablaze like hay stubble in a field and reduced to ashes. He explains who the unprepared are. They fall into two categories: the arrogant and the evil doers. The second group is obvious. They are those who are continuing in unrepentant sin without any thought or care for spiritual or religious matters. They are the scoffers, the God deniers, who revel in their wickedness foolishly believing that divine justice will never be executed. The first group, however, is less obvious. These are the most outwardly pious and religiously-minded. They do believe in a coming judgment. The trouble is that they think they are ready to face it on their own, that they are righteous enough in their own right, that they've done enough to please the Almighty, that he's going to welcome them into eternity with open arms and a happy smile exclaiming "Well done, good and faithful servants." That's what they arrogantly expect; but they're in for an awful shock. Malachi tells us that these, just like the overtly wicked, will be left neither root nor branch; that is to say with no history and no future – none worth remembering or speaking about, anyway.

There is yet a third category of people that Malachi describes. They are those who fear the Lord. Why? Because they know they will stand before him in judgment. That terrifies them because they know he's angry with them on account of their sins – of which they are guilty of too many to count. They are right to fear the Lord's wrath. They know that they justly deserve his condemnation, an eternity of suffering in hell. And that's the problem with the other two groups: they don't fear the Lord; one because they don't believe in him or his judgment, the other because they don't think he's got any reason to be angry with them.

But to these who do fear him, the Lord promises not the judgment they deserve, but rather a Savior. For you, says the Lord, a sun of righteousness will arise with healing in his wings. He will release them from the bondage and debt of their sin so that they will go out "leaping like calves from a stall". The image is of a young animal penned up and suddenly set free, jumping for joy in its newfound liberty. It describes the feeling of joy that will overwhelm the redeemed on the day of their salvation.

In view of this coming judgment, then, and the separation that will take place, the Lord through Malachi issues two final words: one of counsel and the other of promise. First the counsel: "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel." When we hear the word "law" we immediately think of the Ten Commandments. And that's a good place to start because it's certainly included here. But what's translated "law" in this passage is actually the Hebrew word "Torah", which is better translated "instruction". It refers to the entire Old Testament covenant that the Lord made with Israel at Sinai. Not just the commandments, but also all the things that had to do with worship and the priesthood: the sacrifices, ceremonies, and festivals. The laws showed God's people their sins; but all the rest of that had to do with the Lord's provision for mercifully dealing with his sinful people, and how he forgave them through sacrificial blood of atonement. And all of that was type and shadow that pointed to Christ and his saving work. So what the Lord is telling his people is to stay in his Word and keep doing the very things that will teach and remind you of the Savior to come. That way you will keep the faith, and you will recognize the Christ

when he appears. And for the Old Testament saints who lived from Malachi until the coming of Jesus, this was good counsel indeed. They didn't know how long they'd have to wait. We know it was over 400 years. But those who followed the Lord's counsel lived and most of them died trusting in the Savior to come. The rest, who were alive when Jesus came on the scene, were ready to receive him.

And to further help this particular generation, the Lord gave a word of promise: "I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome Day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to the fathers." The reference here is to John the Baptizer, the forerunner and herald of Christ, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah doing what Elijah did; namely he called sinners to repent, to return to the Lord, and to receive the Good News. This is what is meant by "turning the hearts of fathers to children" and so on. Not that he would solve intergenerational problems within families, but that he would restore the penitent faith of the fathers so that they would be sure to transmit it to their offspring, and open the hearts of their children to receive it. John also had the privilege of revealing the Christ to the people of his day when he pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Thus he named Jesus not only the Christ, but also the Lord's appointed sacrifice of atonement.

For the Day of Judgment prophesied by Malachi, the day of fire and the Lord's wrath was about to fall. And it did. It fell on Jesus on Good Friday. That was the first of two "great and awesome Days of the Lord". And though to the eye it was the less spectacular of the two, what happened that day and what the Lord accomplished there on a hill outside of Jerusalem have the greater significance. For that's when the fury of God over the sins of the wicked and arrogant, your sins and mine, was poured out in full force. While the sun in the sky hid its face, the Sun of Righteousness arose – lifted up, nailed on a cross. And from his "wings" – his outstretched arms – comes healing to those who trust in him and what he did for us there. There Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant and gave us the New: a covenant that no longer looks *forward* to the atonement made by Christ, but that remembers and continues to *receive* it in his body and blood.

And as people living in this New Covenant era, we look forward to that next great and awesome Day of the Lord when Christ will appear again. It too will be a day of fire and wrath for the arrogant and wicked, which is why we will do well to heed both the counsel and the promise of the Lord given through Malachi. First, that we remember to faithfully keep and observe the covenant Jesus has given us. That is, that we remain in God's Word, and continue to rehearse the life and ministry of our Savior focusing especially on his death and resurrection, and that we receive his gifts through the Sacraments that tie us directly to his death and resurrection.

And second that we remember the Lord's promise to send Elijah – not one, but many. I refer to faithful Christian pastors, teachers, and religious leaders who are continuing the work of Elijah and John the Baptizer, through whom the Lord calls sinners to repentance and points them to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The Lord has promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail against his Church. And he has promised to provide faithful under shepherds who will feed the flock of God with his pure Word until he returns. Through them the Lord continues to turn the hearts of parents to their children, to transmit the faith from one generation to the next, and he turns the hearts of children to their parents so that they receive it and hold it fast.

And this is important, because like the saints who waited for Christ's first coming, we don't know how long it will be until he comes again. Therefore let us hold fast to the Covenant. Let's heed the Elijah's of our day, who call us to repent of both our arrogance and wrong doing, that our hearts may be turned to fear the Lord and to receive the great salvation he has achieved for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!