

31st Sunday In Ordinary Time, Year A

Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10

Malachi is the last of the twelve minor prophets and this is the last book of the Old Testament. It marks the end of prophetic utterance for some 400 years until the coming of John the Baptist. It was written after the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon and had resettled the land and rebuilt the temple. The priests assumed civic as well as religious authority and failed miserably at both tasks. Because Malachi denounced both priests and rulers, he chose to use a pseudonym. He made a proper name out of the Hebrew phrase which means, "my messenger." In this selection the Lord is chastising the priests of Israel for their disobedience. Earlier in the chapter he wrote that the priests were offering blind, lame and sick animals for sacrifice, which was forbidden by the Law of Moses.

14A great King am I, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. God's name WILL be feared among the nations at the time of judgment. We are reminded of this in 2 Corinthians (5:10): "The lives of all of us are to be revealed before the tribunal of Christ so that each one may receive his recompense, good or bad, according to his life in the body."

2:1And now, O priests, this commandment is for you: These were the priests of the Jewish Temple who were the inheritors of the covenant of Levi. They were anointed for temple service, set apart for holiness, and their lives were devoted to offering the gifts and sacrifices of men to God.⁵ **if you do not listen,**

2:if you do not lay it to heart, This is the big IF, for IF the priests do not take the command concerning the choice of perfect animals for sacrifice to heart, they will bring a curse down upon themselves and their blessing will become a curse. This curse is spelled out in the next verse: "Lo, I will deprive you of the shoulder and I will strew dung in your faces, the dung of your feasts, and you will be carried off with it." The shoulder was the part of a sacrificial animal allotted by the law to the priests and God is saying that it will be withheld from them.⁴

to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, I will send a curse upon you and of your blessing I will make a curse. The blessing that God is referring to in this passage is called the Aaronite blessing from Numbers (6:22-27) by which the priests were to place the name of the Lord upon the people.²

8You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction; you have made void the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts. Because the priests have neglected their duty to preach the law of God with fidelity and good example, they have voided the covenant with Levi, the Israelite tribe chosen for priestly service, and they are responsible for an erosion of faith among the people. By their poor example these wrong ways have become acceptable and have spread.

9I, therefore, have made you contemptible and base before all the people, since you do not keep my ways, but show partiality in your decisions. This refers to the custom of deciding verdicts when there were not the two witnesses the law required. In such cases, the question was brought to the priests who would cast lots to discern God's judgment.³ God had warned them in 2 Chronicles (19:7): "And now, let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Act carefully, for with the Lord, our God, there is no injustice, no partiality, no bribe-taking."

10Have we not all the one father? This refers to Abraham, whose seed they all were. They were a nation of brethren. **Has not the one God created us? Why then do we break faith with one another, violating the covenant of our fathers?** There is a shift here from the

previous verses where God is speaking, to a lamentation of the priests and people who have understood their sin and have recognized its saddest effect: division and broken faith and the denial of their unity under the covenant.¹ On the positive side of all this, when consequences of sin are revealed, God is giving his people a chance to work on their problems. While sins remain hidden, nothing is being done about them.

1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13

This letter of Paul's was written about 20 years after the death of Jesus. His combination of self-sufficiency and sincere regard for the spiritual welfare of his flock makes us see him as the ideal apostle, preaching and teaching in the most effective way imaginable. He has personal integrity and credibility because what he has received as a gift he gives as a gift.¹

Brothers and sisters:

7We were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children. This tender image of the nursing mother suggests the giving of nourishment as well as profound affection and care. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy gave the self-sacrificing gift of themselves just as a nursing mother does.

8With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us.

9You recall, brothers and sisters, our toil and drudgery. Paul was a tentmaker by trade and in this way he supported himself when he preached the Gospel even though he had a right to financial support from the community. It also strengthened his moral authority when he had to warn people against the temptation of idleness and it gave them good example. The tents were woven from camel hair or goat hair. The goats were usually black and so were the tents. The wool of Cilician goats was much prized and Paul was a native of Cilicia so we presume that he was primarily a weaver of goat hair fabric. **Working night and day in order not to burden any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.**

13And for this reason we too give thanks to God unceasingly, that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, Note that the Divine Word was passed on orally. The Gospel preaching was done by the apostles who handed on the spoken word and also gave their example. The gospel does not rest on the authority of the preacher, nor is it effective through him, but “the word of God is made active in you who believe.” In other words, the gospel becomes effective through GOD’S POWER. **you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe.** The Catechism (CC101) tells us that “the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men.” It goes on to say (CC104) that “in the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them.”⁵

Matthew 23: 1-12

In this reading Jesus warns the crowds and his disciples that the scribes and the Pharisees are dangerous and their false piety is unworthy of imitation. Jesus takes aim at Pharisaic attitudes and in the section which follows our reading, he announces seven “woes” indicting them as murderers.⁶

1Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying,

2“The scribes and the Pharisees The first century Jewish historian Josephus estimated that there were about six thousand Pharisees in Palestine but their religious observance was the

standard against which Jewish life was measured. It was from this group that rabbinical Judaism as we know it today sprouted. The scribes were teachers of the Law who were drawn from the ranks of the Pharisees. They had committed themselves to a minutely correct observance of the Jewish Law.² **have taken their seat on the chair of Moses.** This may or may not have been an actual “chair” like those used in later synagogues, or it may have been a symbol of teaching authority. The Pharisees thus preach the Mosaic Law with authority, but they failed to practice its “weightier matters.”⁶

3Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. Jesus commends the structure of the Jewish tradition of teaching while distinguishing it from the conduct of the teachers.²

4For they preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. This severe interpretation of the Law is verified not only by the incidents recorded in the Gospels but also by the Rabbis themselves who were sometimes as critical of this rigorism as are the Gospels. Over time they developed thousands and thousands of rules and regulations and they did not allow the slightest relaxation of them. Not one regulation would they relax or remove.⁹ This is the first of two criticisms in this selection; the second complaint is of the vanity and hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees.⁴

5All their works are performed to be seen. They were more interested in looking holy than in being holy! **They widen their phylacteries** These are small leather boxes containing Scripture verses. They are tied to the left wrist and forehead while praying. Making them broader, they were more noticeable and in this way the Pharisees sought to parade their piety for public recognition.⁶ **and lengthen their tassels.** According to the Mosaic Law, Israelites were instructed to wear “tassels on the corners of their garments”. These were outward reminders to follow God’s commands. Lengthening their tassels made them more noticeable.⁶

6They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, The back seats were occupied by the children and the most unimportant people; the further forward the seat, the greater the honor. The most honored seats of all were the seats of the elders, which faced the congregation. If a man was seated there, everyone would see that he was present and he could conduct himself throughout the service with a pose of piety which the congregation could not fail to see.⁹

7greetings in marketplaces, Near Eastern courtesy demanded that the length of the salutation be in proportion to the dignity of the person and thus the greeting was a status symbol.⁽⁸⁾ **and the salutation ‘Rabbi.’** “Rabbi” is a Hebrew word meaning “my great one” and is a title for revered Jewish teachers.⁸

8As for you, do not be called, ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers.

9Call no one on earth your father; Jesus uses hyperbole to post a warning that no one should pridefully desire such titles and no earthly father must come before God, the one supreme Father of all.⁷ His words are not meant literally for the NT writers elsewhere use “father” for natural fathers (Heb. 12:7-11) and spiritual fathers in the Church (1 Cor 4:15 and Philemon 10). St. Paul knew quite well that in calling himself a spiritual father in Christ he was not violating any commandment of Christ. John also uses the title when he refers to all the elders of the Church as “fathers.”(1John 2:13-14) The spiritual fatherhood of the priest is derived from all that he does for the life of grace in a soul that ordinary parents do for the natural life of the children God gives them. It is the priest who gives spiritual life to souls at the

baptismal font. He educates those brought forth to life in Christ by their baptismal rebirth; he teaches, warns, corrects and advises his spiritual children and nourishes them with the bread of life in the sacraments. When souls go out of this world to meet God, it is the priest who is at their death-beds, soothing their last hours, allaying their fears, and consoling them as no others could do. Having no family, the priest belongs to every family. Catholics call the priest “father,” not to the exclusion of their Father in heaven, but as a manifestation on earth of the supreme Fatherhood of God in the spiritual order.⁷ *you have but one Father in heaven.*
¹⁰*Do not be called ‘Master’, you have but one master, the Christ.* The Pharisees were greedy for honor and recognition. Jesus insists that every form of authority, especially in the area of religion, should be exercised as a form of service of others; it must not be used to indulge personal vanity or greed. This applies to the members of the community as well as to the leaders.

¹¹*The greatest among you must be your servant.* The Pharisees desired very strong places of leadership in the church as well as leadership in the community. Jesus challenged these norms of society. He was not against leadership, but against leadership that served itself, rather than others.

¹²*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”* The whole design of the Pharisees was to dress and act in such a way as to draw attention to themselves whereas the whole design of the Christian is to obliterate himself, so that if men see his good deeds, they may glorify not him, but his Father in Heaven.⁹

Some of the information for this commentary has been taken from: (1) “Workbook for Lectors and Gospel Readers” by Aelred Rosser, (2) The Commentary Notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray, (3) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers” by Lawrence E. Mick, (4) “The Books of Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and Joel” by George Denzer, (5) “The Catechism Of The Catholic Church,” (6) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (7) “Radio Replies Vol. 3” by Father Leslie Rumble and Father Charles Carty, (8) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” and (9) “The Gospel Of Matthew” by William Barclay.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.