

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Malachi 3:19-20; Psalm 98 (97); 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19

As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another

Luke 21:5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, 6 “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Luke 21:7 They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” 8 And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.



Luke 21:9 “When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” 10 Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

Luke 21:12 “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all be-

cause of my name. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Towards the close of the liturgical year, the lectionary turns to the end of time and to the signs that signal the end. These passages can be difficult to read today because of the language and metaphors used. The underlying teaching—reading the times, conversion and endurance—has not lost any of its relevance. Even the illustration of families divided is a feature of the faith today.

KIND OF WRITING

The passage is a good example of apocalyptic writing. Apocalypse means simply “revelation” and the function of such writing is to help people understand the times in which they are living and to encourage attitudes of faithfulness and resilience. The writing is often highly symbolic (code is too simple an estimate) and, under the guise of describing the future, it offers a key to the present, naming the calibre of the times. Generally speaking, apocalyptic writing occurs at a time when the community of faith is threatened and its identity is being undermined. The basic teaching is threefold: the faithfulness of God, in spite of appearances; the call to renewed conversion, in the light of infidelity; the call to endurance, in spite of apparently overwhelming odds.

Even though difficult to “unpack”, perhaps the current situation of church resembles the social context of apocalyp-

Thought for the day

When the news from the Middle East—the cradle of civilisation and faith—is so consistently dreadful, our dismay can easily devolve into despair. What about all the innocent lives lost? What of the old, the new-born, the newly-weds and so on? The devastation can be overwhelming, leaving us feeling both powerless and furious. And yet, at the centre of our faith is a deep conviction that the forces of evil and destruction are not, and will not be, the final word. Yes, it is terrible; but no, it is not the last word. God’s faithfulness in Christ’s resurrection assures us and invites us too to the same witness of fidelity, even against the odds.

Prayer

God of peace, in our time we hear of wars and rumours of wars. Help us not to fear, not to lose hope, but to trust you, our Rock, our only hope.

tic. In our time, we need to be able to read the “signs of the times”, discover new resources of resilient fidelity and to walk once more the path of conversion.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls. (Joel 2:30–32)

The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. (Zephaniah 1:14–16)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ (Acts 2:14–21)

ST PAUL

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. (1 Thessalonians 5:1–6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Substantially the same material is found in Matthew and Mark.

Luke follows Mark more closely but there are differences of emphasis. In the saying about the Temple, Matthew and Mark resemble each other while Luke has “some” instead of disciples and the location for the second question is no longer the Mount of Olives. As regards the second coming, Luke leaves out an important expression, “this is just the

beginning of the birth pangs”. Labour pain was a traditional Jewish metaphor for the troubles at the end, as the new creation is born. Luke replaces the metaphor with “and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:11), perhaps because he is not writing for a Jewish audience. He also strengthens “not yet” to “not at once”. Finally, as regards persecution, although Matthew has put another version of this material earlier in chapter 10 of his Gospel, he follows Mark very closely. Luke makes several significant adjustments, noted in the verse by verse commentary.

Verses 5-6 Luke wrote after the actual destruction of the Temple, a fact which lends increased authority to the teaching which follows.

Verse 7 The questioners are not disciples (named in Mark and anonymous in Matthew) but the same “they.” The location on the Mount of Olives is omitted, perhaps because it would not carry any meaning for Luke’s Roman readers.

Verse 8 The reference is to Christian false prophets.

Verse 9 The change to “not at once” or “not immediately” signals Luke’s awareness (evident in the Acts) that a time of church of unknown duration would take place before the end.

Verse 11 As noted above, the resonant language of labour pains is substituted with the more general “dreadful portents” and “great signs.”

Verse 12 Luke adds prisons, perhaps because being handed over to Jewish synagogues was not a real threat in Rome, Greece or Asia Minor.

Verse 13 This verse is different in all three Gospels. *And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations* (Mark 13:10–11). *As a testimony to them and the Gentiles* (Matthew 10:18–19). *This will give you an opportunity to testify* (Luke 21:13–14; witness being a special theme in Acts. Cf. Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 6:3, 13; 7:44, 58; 10:22, 39, 41, 43; 13:22, 31; 14:3; 15:8; 16:2; 20:26; 22:5, 12, 15,

18, 20; 23:11; 26:5, 16, 22).

Verse 14-17 Curiously, Luke omits the reference to the Holy Spirit and rewrites the passage: So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict (Luke 21:14–16). Contrast 1 Peter 3:15!

Verse 18 A phrase found also in Matthew 10:30. Cf. Luke 12:7.

Verse 19 Luke rephrases to emphasise the personal engagement of the believer.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Luke presents Jesus as a prophet, capable of reading the signs of the times, and one who offered wise and insightful advice on how to cope with difficult times. Who are the people you see who act like this in the troubled times we live in today? Maybe you yourself have been a calming influence in the face of turmoil within your family, parish, church, workplace, or elsewhere. Can you claim that gift and give thanks for being such a person?

2. Jesus alerts his listeners to the transitory nature of human grandeur and splendour. How have you been reminded of this truth? What lessons has this given you about life?

3. In any walk of life troubles will come. Jesus encourages his listeners to stand firm in such circumstances, telling them ‘your endurance will win you your lives’. When you are in the midst of inner turmoil and/or outer trouble or opposition, what have you found gives you the strength and ability to endure?

PRAYER

Lord God of all the ages, the One who is, who was, and who is to come, stir up within us a longing for your kingdom, steady our hearts in the time of trial, and grant us patient endurance until the sun of justice dawns.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

| | | | |
|---------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| Temple | Mt 24:1-3 | Mk 13:1-4 | Lk 21:5-6 |
| Second coming | Mt 24:4-8 | Mk 13:5-8 | Lk 21:8-11 |
| Persecution | Mt 24:9-14 | Mk 13:9-13 | Lk 21:12-19 |
| Q Source | Mt 10:17-22 | = | Lk 17:20-37 |

For we hear that some among you are living an undisciplined life

2 Thess 3:6 *But we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from any brother who lives an undisciplined (ataktōs) life and not according to the tradition they received from us.* 7 For you know yourselves how you must imitate us, because we did not behave without discipline (*ētaktōsamen*) among you, 8 and we did not eat anyone's food without paying. Instead, in toil and drudgery we worked night and day in order not to burden any of you. 9 It was not because we do not have that right, but to give ourselves as an example for you to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this command: "If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat." 11 For we hear that some among you are living an undisciplined (*ataktōs*) life, not doing their own work but meddling in the work of others. 12 Now such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and so provide their own food to eat. 13 *But you, brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing what is right.* 14 *But if anyone does not obey our message through this letter, take note of him and do not associate closely with him, so that he may be ashamed.* 15 *Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading is a direct follow-on after last Sunday's passage. The introductory paragraph (3:1-5) is continued in a specific warning to the "idle" (3:6-13). As we shall see below, there is a problem with the word "idle" so that the passage may be of wider application. The full text is given above, with the addition of v. 6 and vv. 13-15.

KIND OF WRITING

| Topics | Letter | Speech |
|---------|-----------------------|------------------|
| 1:1-2 | <i>Letter opening</i> | |
| 1:3-12 | Thanksgiving | Introduction |
| 2:1-2 | Body of the letter | Topics announced |
| 2:3-15 | | Proof |
| 2:16-18 | Peroratio | |
| 3:1-15 | Exhortation | |
| 3:16-18 | <i>Letter ending</i> | |

The lectionary excerpt comes from the exhortation, 3:1-15.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The key word for understanding what is going on here is the word translated as "idle". "Living in idleness" is in Greek, *ataktōs peripatountos*. The second word means to walk and is the regular biblical idiom for living or moral behaviour. The first word "*ataktōs*"—an adverb—does not mean first of all idly but rather "in a disorderly manner", that is, not according to the tradition. The only two occurrences as an adverb are here in this chapter. The meaning seems to be not so much laziness but rather an irresponsible attitude to the obligation to work, hence, disorderly. This is the regular meaning elsewhere. For example, when Philo of Alexandria talks about the chaos before creation he uses the adjective *ataktos*, meaning chaotic, disorderly. This reading effectively sets aside the traditional reading that some people had begun to give up work on account of the proximity of the Second Coming. The real issue seems to have been wandering evangelists who expected automatic support from whatever community they visited. In any case, in 2 Thessalonians, it seems that some thought the Second Coming had already taken place.

In order to combat this undesirable situation, our author draws upon the practice and attitudes of Paul himself, with expansions and emphases to address this later issue. The passages below from 1 Thessalonians are helpful in this regard, as is the revealing passage taken from the *Didache*.

RELATED PASSAGES

For you recall, brothers and sisters, our toil and drudgery: By working night and day so as not to impose a burden on any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, as to how holy and righteous and blameless our conduct was toward you who believe. (1 Thessalonians 2:9-10)

But we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, to aspire to lead a quiet life, to attend to your own business, and to work with your hands, as we commanded you. (1 Thessalonians 4:10-11)

And we urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the undisciplined (*ataktous NB*), comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient toward all. (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

Now concerning the apostles and prophets, deal with them as follows in accordance with the rule of the gospel. Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as if he were the Lord. But he is not to stay for more than one day, unless there is need, in which case he may stay another. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle leaves, he is to take nothing except bread until he finds his next night's lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet. (*Didache* 11:3-6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 7 The historical Paul did call on people to imitate him, not in financial matters, but rather in faith and love.

Verse 8-9 The historical Paul undertook manual labour (tent-making), so as not to be a burden. Cf. 1 Thessalonians 2. He did this to keep his independence and perhaps because of his social class and education. Cf. 1 Cor 9:1-23; 2 Cor 11:7-11; 12:13-14.

Verse 10 This is a direct shot at the wandering missionaries and their tendency to sponge off others. V. 10b has a wisdom air to it. Cf. Prov 6:6-11 or 10:4.

Verse 11 Thus, these missionaries live not lazy but disorderly lives, out of sync with the received Pauline example and tradition. Contrast: Acts 6:1-4. Our author sees not freedom but idleness.

Verse 12 This is the old teaching from 1 Thess 4:10-11, recycled for a new context, that of the itinerant preachers. Like good rabbis before them, they should not live from the *kerygma*.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We can all be "undisciplined" in a variety of ways. Would it help if I were to name my own experience?
2. The sharp instruction in v. 10b is an invitation to act sensibly and responsibly. Pointedly, this reading is given in the Breviary for Morning Prayer, Week 1!

PRAYER

Help us Lord to lead ordered and disciplined lives so that our living may be an inspiration and not a hindrance to others. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The sun of justice will arise with healing in its wings

Mal 3:19 For the day is coming, blazing like an oven,
when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble,
And the day that is coming will set them on fire,
leaving them neither root nor branch,
says the Lord of hosts.
20 But for you who fear my name, the sun of justice
will arise with healing in its wings;
*And you will go out leaping like calves from the stall
and tread down the wicked;*
21 *They will become dust under the soles of your feet,
on the day when I take action, says the Lord of hosts.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading is so short that it will be quite hard for the hearer to make sense of it. In any case, it speaks of a future “day”, a day of judgment. In the Apocalyptic worldview, the question is how to prepare for this day.

Note: there is a discrepancy regarding chapter between the Hebrew Bible and traditional English translations (NRSV). The version above is the NABRev, which follows the Hebrew, giving the same text but over only three chapters. The lectionary gives only vv. 19-20a, but here we give a slightly wider context.

KIND OF WRITING

It is a judgment oracle, written in poetry, without the usually close parallels between the lines. However, 19ab is echoed in 19bc.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The dating of this book is disputed. However many, perhaps most, scholars would place it in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, that is mid-fifth century BC.

Using the Hebrew chapter numbers, the book has the following outline or shape.

- 1:2-5 God’s love for Israel
- 1:6-2:9 Priesthood polluted
- 2:10-16 Infidelity in Israel
- 2:17-3:5 Purifying the community
- 3:6-12 Return to the Lord
- 3:13-21 Hope for the faithful
- 3:22-24 Moses and Elijah

Our reading comes from the section offering hope to the community. The whole section is worth reading and it might be worthwhile expanding the reading for Mass.

RELATED PASSAGES

The preceding verses help us grasp what

is going on:

Then those who fear the Lord spoke with one another, and the Lord listened attentively; A record book was written before him of those who fear the Lord and esteem his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my own special possession, on the day when I take action. And I will have compassion on them, as a man has compassion on his son who serves him. Then you will again distinguish between the just and the wicked, Between the person who serves God, and the one who does not. (Malachi 3:16–18)

The Day of the Lord

I will produce portents both in the sky and on the earth— blood, fire, and columns of smoke. The sunlight will be turned to darkness and the moon to the colour of blood, before the day of the LORD comes— that great and terrible day! (Joel 2:30–31)

Woe to those who wish for the day of the LORD! Why do you want the LORD’s day of judgment to come? It will bring darkness, not light. (Amos 5:18)

“For the day of the LORD is approaching for all the nations! Just as you have done, so it will be done to you. You will get exactly what your deeds deserve. (Obadiah 1:15)

The Sun of Vindication/Righteousness

The one who rules fairly among men, the one who rules in the fear of God, is like the light of morning when the sun comes up, a morning in which there are no clouds. He is like the brightness after rain that produces grass from the earth. (2 Samuel 23:3–4)

The light of the full moon will be like the sun’s glare and the sun’s glare will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven days, when the LORD binds up his people’s fractured bones and heals their

severe wound. (Isaiah 30:26 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 19 The coming day of the Lord is often mentioned in the prophets: Is 13:9; 34:8; Joel 3:3; Zeph 1:18. As the preceding verse makes clear, it is a day of judgment, when all will be made clear. For the believer, it is a day of salvation and grace; for the sinner, a day of negative judgment and disaster. The idea of heat is clear—like an oven. Stubble (left over after the harvest) is precisely for burning, to enrich the earth. This time, however, nothing whatsoever will be left.

Verse 20a Fear, as usual, does not mean psychological fright but fitting awe before YHWH. The image of a sun, representing justice, with wings, is a common one for the epiphany of a God in the Ancient Near East. The idea of God *shining* on us is found widely: Nm 6:25; Ps 4:7; 31:17; 34:6; 84:12. Justice could be translated vindication, i.e., a hope responding to the endurance of the faithful. Cf. 2 Sam 23:4; Isa 30:26; 60:1, 3. Justice could also mean victory, as in Isa 41:2, 10; 45:21, 23; 46:13; 51:5, 6.

Healing from what? Perhaps another passage gives a clue: *Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.* (Malachi 3:5)

Verses 20b-21 The surge of liberated energy is abundantly clear. More significant is the fact that the faithful will share in the exercise of God’s judgment.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Fidelity and endurance are two words which might help me reflect on my own path of discipleship.

2. Can I name my own need of healing at present? People are often drawn these days to more therapeutic metaphors for salvation and indeed salvation itself means both to be saved and to be cured.

PRAYER

God, you call us constantly to renewed faithfulness and trust. Help us to open our hearts to your presence in our lives; help us to respond to your gracious love from deep within ourselves. Spread your wings of blessing over us and let us know your healing in our lives. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Malachi 3:19-20; Psalm 98 (97); 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19

READINGS 1 AND 3

The sudden appearance of God's justice is to be found in both readings. The appropriate preparation is called *fear* in Malachi and *endurance* in Luke.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 98 (97) reflects on God's future justice and this is the very topic of the first reading.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Malachi 3:19-20

Our short reading contains a haunting image of hope and healing—for all who hold fast to the faith!

Second reading

2 Thessalonians 3:7-12

This reading could be easily misunderstood. The context is heightened expectation of the end and consequent abandonment of secular activities. The author practices and teaches otherwise.

Gospel

Luke 21:5-19

Like many of his contemporaries, Jesus foresaw a future threat to Jerusalem and its Temple. Underneath the reading, so to speak, lies a careful teaching on how to understand what is going on and how to react, so as to win your life.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

The First Book of the Maccabees is an abbreviation of a longer work, written in Greek. The author tells the story of a fierce religious persecution under the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who ruled from 175 BC until his death in 164 BC. He persecuted the Jews, burned their holy books and desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem. Some, of course, succumbed and abandoned the faith. But many did not and there were martyrs, people faithful to the point of death. Until this time, there was no real faith in life after death. But, they still believed in the faithfulness of God. The question arose: how will God be faithful to those who have been faithful to him to

the point of death unless there is life after death. In that context, belief in immortality and resurrection evolved.

Monday 17 November

St Elizabeth of Hungary, religious

1 Maccabees 1:10-15, 41-43, 54-57, 62-6

In the middle of the second century BC, a Syrian king, Antiochus IV, initiated a terrible persecution against the Jews and tried to obliterate their Temple and their religion. In Jewish tradition, he is remembered till today as *ha-rasha*, the wicked one. From this reading you can see why.

Luke 18:35-43

Stories like this one are meant to be read at two levels. Jesus did indeed heal people; yet, the story is retold to help us to acknowledge our own need of light, faith and salvation.

Tuesday 18 November

Dedication of the basilicas of Sts Peter and Paul

2 Maccabees 6:18-31

The story of the persecution is illustrated in this fascinating vignette. The temptation to pretend is subtle, but the old man is not taken in.

Luke 19:1-10

This story—unique to Luke—is one of the stories most beloved of children, perhaps so account of the stature of Zacchaeus. The word “today” brings us into our own present moment.

Wednesday 19 November

2 Maccabees 7:1, 20-31

The stories of martyrs always fascinate and challenge us. But there is even more to this one than a noble witness and fidelity. In this chapter 7, we begin to see the traces of faith in the resurrection and life after death. It wasn't speculation that brought them to believe in life after death. Instead, it was a deep desire to believe in a faithful God, who would be faithful beyond death to those who were faithful to him to the point of death.

Luke 19:11-28

The image of the gentle Luke is somewhat dislodged by this challenging parable and even more by its conclusion.

Perhaps originally, there were two separate stories, joined together here for greater impact. At the time of writing, those who refused the king would be understood to be Jesus' contemporaries.

Thursday 20 November

1 Maccabees 2:15-2

Under pressure of vicious persecution, the Jews eventually rebelled. We see the start of the Maccabean (the word means hammer) revolt in this story. There were many battles and, as is the way, the stability of the victory was assured by the chance death of Antiochus IV.

Luke 19:41-44

A church on the Mount of Olives commemorates this vignette—no doubt historical. The actually happened later to Jerusalem is read back, with the 20:20 vision of hindsight.

Friday 21 November

Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

1 Maccabees 4:36-37, 52-59

The story moves quickly to the restoration of the Temple. This rededication is still marked today with the eight-day festival of Hanukkah.

Luke 19:45-48

The Temple action—a very disturbing challenge at the time—is very briefly recounted here. Luke's kindly attitude to the Temple accounts for the brevity and even the lightness of the reference.

Saturday 21 November

St Cecilia, virgin and martyr

1 Maccabees 6:1-13

The last days of Antiochus IV are told with grim satisfaction. It is unlikely he made the conversion placed on his lips here, but it does tell us how the Jews understood his sudden death!

Luke 20:27-40

Jesus was an apocalyptic Jew, who believed along with the Pharisees in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees were more committed traditionalists and rejected the relatively new teaching about life after death.