

This is not a time to give up

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 19, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

The three lessons today seem to put forth a very discouraging or even dismal and perhaps frightening perspective or picture of what judgment, death, end of the world, that type of thing. But to truly understanding these readings, the passages from Malachi and the letter from Paul to the church in Thessalonica and the Gospel of Luke, we must consider the context in which each of them was written so we really can begin to understand what the writer is trying to bring forth for us.

Actually, Malachi, the prophet, was living at a time when the Babylonian exile had ended. It was to be a time of great peace, great joy, and full life. The people had returned from exile and the temple had been rebuilt. And they were in ordinary times that are very disturbing. He discovers and the people discover that there are, Malachi calls them the "Proud and All Evildoers," and that God will in fact turn them into stubble and set them on fire. These are the very people who Malachi thought should have been leading the returned people to glory. Psalm 98:5-6, 7-8, 9

What was happening is the religious leaders, the priests, were being irresponsible, failing to correct abuses that began to crop up. And so instead of a renewed and fulfilled and beautiful life upon their return things were become very upsetting. The community was beginning to fall into disarray. People were attacking one another, and there was a failure of leadership. And it was these people that Malachi was deploring. It wasn't the end of the world or a final judgment or anything of the sort.

[Full text of the readings \[1\]](#)

Malachi is actually putting forth a word of hope: "For you who revere my name, the sun of justice shall rise with healing in its wings." The "sun of justice," an image of God, especially God in Jesus. And so he could still look forward with hope and joy and great anticipation for this Son of Justice who will renew the people for good.

In the second lesson, Paul's letter to the church of Thessalonica, this was written in the early 50s. It was a time after Paul had traveled extensively and preaching the Good News in many different places, establishing communities, and things had looked so hopeful. But now he's discovering that in this community, and I'm sure some of the others, people were beginning to, well their communal sense was breaking down, where they had established these beautiful communities and people were sharing, now some were becoming what we would call free-loaders. They weren't really participating in community life. They had stopped working; they just expected to be taken care of.

Part of it was the problem that they had thought -- and Paul had preached and the other disciples too -- that Jesus was to return very quickly. They were expecting that return and so they thought, what was the purpose of trying to build a life and so on, Jesus is coming. There was confusion and it was hard for people to adjust to the fact that well it's been a number of years now and there's no evidence that Jesus is coming back anytime soon. They are having to adjust what they had learned, had to adjust their religious understandings, and that's hard as you know, all of us. If we have to try adjust what we have been taught and see it in a different light and so on. It's very difficult, very confusing. Some of us get discouraged and perhaps kind of drop by the wayside as these people in Thessalonica were doing.

Paul writes to them and tries to encourage them, "The time of Jesus return is not right now. We must continue to be a vibrant community where we share together and we really work together and be the community that we were in the beginning." So again it isn't the end of the world by any means. Paul is encouraging them to keep going, to endure.

The gospel lesson clearly seems to indicate the end times, as we call them, the time at the end of the world, the return of Jesus. But this is the lesson that we must especially try to put in its proper context historically. The Gospel of Luke was written in the middle 80s, perhaps even, the late 80s, so the kind of things that are being described had already happened. The Christian community in Jerusalem had already seen the temple destroyed. The people were dispersed and everything had broken down in society. In fact a terrible famine had developed and they had to struggle through that. And they were finding themselves persecuted. Peter and Paul had been put to death and other disciples too had been persecuted and put to death.

It was so terrible that even within families, the unity of the family broke down. It seems especially cruel but parents betraying children, or children betraying parents, brothers and sisters. This was a time of terrible turmoil in the community for which the Gospel of Luke was written. It's not a time when the people are looking forward to the end of the world, really, they have seen all these terrible things. So it's a time when they need to be uplifted, need to be encouraged, need to be reminded that, yes Jesus had been with them, living, someone they knew.

At this point perhaps, there were still a few of the original witnesses left, people who knew Jesus, but most of them were gone. The community had been instructed by them and had experienced their faith and their awareness that Jesus is alive. Even though he had been crucified and humiliated and destroyed, they had experienced him alive and so those witnesses were still around. Luke is reminding the people, look this is the between times, when Jesus as he promised has sent his Holy Spirit to be the living presence of God in their community. That's why Luke tells them, "Look this will give you an opportunity now to be my witnesses, to testify in my name."

Because as those who are now being reminded, Jesus is still alive. The end times are as Jesus says in the gospel, "No one knows," he doesn't know and no one knows. But we're not to act as though it is eminent. It will go on a long time probably and it has. And so Luke is simply trying to encourage them. He tells them, "You don't even to prepare in advance if you are going to be put on trial. I will give you words, and I will give you wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

So Jesus is with them, they can have confidence, and in fact remind themselves of what happened at the very end of the time when Jesus was present after his resurrection. He sends them into the world, "and I will be with you all days, even until the end of the world." So this is what they need to be reminded at this time to give them the courage and the perseverance that God will always protect them. Yes there will be terrible suffering, but in a kind of dramatic way Jesus says how their protection will be, that somehow God will see that not a hair of your head will perish. It may seem that you have died, but God is with you and will bring you through that to new life. That's the promise.

By your endurance, you will gain your life, by your endurance. This a plea to them to renew their sense of being witnesses, to renew their sense of the presence of Jesus through his living spirit and to be determined to endure and to gain this peace and fullness of life that is the promise of Jesus. A promise that is possible for us even in this in between time that peace of Jesus can be deep within us. By your endurance you will gain your soul; you will gain your life.

Now as we listen to the experiences of the Jewish people during the time of Malachi and during the time of Paul and the church of Thessalonica and the Lucan community we need to ask ourselves, "What does this all mean

for me?" Well I think it's pretty obvious that some of these things are very pertinent. Our church too at the moment is going through a terrible period, much like the Jewish people upon the return to Jerusalem after the exile. There were terrible problems, but mostly it was the problem with leadership. And we have had to confront that in our church because of, well I guess most prominently right now, we think of the abuse scandal that has torn through our whole church throughout the world.

And a great deal of it is due to the leadership and the lack of a culpability of bishops really taking charge and getting down to the root problems of the abuse, that hasn't been done. And we still are finding that bishops are not being held accountable for all that has gone on and so our leadership has been less than we would want. And we feel that this is devastating, and it is, especially for those who have been the victims and who still face being victims today, young people in our church. This could still be happening.

We need this word of encouragement that Malachi offers when he tells the people of his time that, "for you who revere my name, the sun of justice, it will be a healing sun, a healing nourishing." Which the sun can be, it can give us strength, and warmth and comfort. And so that's how it will be if we remain faithful. That is what Malachi was pleading for them to do.

There are other problems that we confront in the church. The fact that there are 30 million people who have walked away, an article in *Commonweal* magazine some time ago written by Peter Steinfels was called 'A church adrift' and that's what it seems to be. How can we have 30 million people leaving our church and not a word about this from our leadership?

The bishops are meeting this week in Baltimore this week and there's nothing on their agenda that indicates they will discuss this question. Say what's going wrong, why are people walking away? People don't want to, they are yearning for spiritual leadership and so it's a very hard time.

Then also we live in a world where there's violence. This past week there was a large number of Iraqi people living in our area, they are people who have come from Iraq they belong to a Chaldean rite of the Catholic church. In their land their people are being devastated, since 2003 when we invaded that country there have been 63 Christian churches bombed. See what has happened is that because we as a nation we failed to listen to Pope John Paul II in 1991 when he declared, "No, never again war," because it destroys the lives innocent people, but also it always leaves behind "a trail of hatred and resentment that make it all the more difficult to resolve the very problems that provoked the war." And that's what happening in Iraq now, this trail of hatred and resentment.

The people of Iraq who have been able to come to this country, many of them have been here for many years even, but more and more have had to flee, and they are feeling that there's not enough has been done to resolve those problems of hatred and resentment, that trail of hatred and resentment. And it's really true. It seems that not much is being done to protect those Christian communities in Iraq or some of the other minority communities within that country. Sending more troops over there won't do it. We have to find a way to assist the Iraqi leadership to try to come together, and to try to restore some unity in their nation so there can be genuine peace.

It's not your job or my job to figure out exactly how to do that, but we have to give encouragement. Our government must give some encouragement and even pressure on the leaders in Iraq to see to the wellbeing of all the people of Iraq. And so this again becomes a very difficult time for us and for our brothers and sisters in Iraq and not just the Christians, all the people of Iraq who have suffered so much the first war started in 1991.

We do live in a time when there's this turmoil everywhere. In the church, in our society, in our lives. That is why we need to listen carefully to the assurances that Malachi gives to us, "that the sun of justice will heal." We need to listen to the assurances that Paul gives the people of Thessalonica, "It's OK. The end time is not here.

We must continue to work and build community." And we must listen to Jesus in the gospel reminding us, "I am with you even until the end of the world," and we must understand that he will give us words and wisdom to confront the terrible problems that we face. We must have confidence to go deep within our spirit to experience that presence of Jesus and know that by our endurance we will gain our souls, that is, gain our lives.

As we celebrate this Eucharist today, we really need to hear deeply what Malachi, Paul and Jesus are telling us: This is not a time to give up, to be in despair. It is a time to renew our sense of awareness that Jesus lives within us and that we are moving toward that fullness of God's reign. And have that confidence even now once more to be the witnesses that we are called to be. Jesus says, "This is the time and opportunity to testify, to be my witnesses." We pray for that as we celebrate this Eucharist.

Earlier this morning I read Psalm 1 in the daily prayer for priests, and it's a beautiful psalm that I think might be a fitting conclusion to our reflection this morning:

"Happy is the one who follows not the counsel of the wicked, nor lingers in the way of sinners, nor sits in the company with scoffers. But whose delight is the law of the Lord; and who ponders God's law day and night. That person is like a tree that is planted beside flowing of waters, who yields its fruit in due season; whose leaves never fade; and all that person does shall prosper. ... For God guards the way of the just. God guards the way of the just ..."

Let us take those words with us as we celebrate this Eucharist and as we live the church today and go back into our world to witness to Jesus in the midst of all that is happening even now.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Andrew Parish in Pasadena, Calif.]

Source URL (retrieved on 07/27/2017 - 11:46): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/not-time-give>

Links:

[1] <http://www.usccb.org/nab/readings/111410.shtml>