

# Burning Issues

Sermon for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 17 November 2019  
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT

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Malachi 4: 1-2a; Psalm 98; 2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13; Luke 21: 5-19

+In the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

It's timely to be hearing today's apocalyptic readings—the kind of readings we always get on these last Sundays of the Church year. Because that biblical word, apocalyptic, is currently on everyone's lips in Australia. Once again we greet the coming summer with bushland, regional towns and even parts of our major city on fire. This state of affairs is now the new normal, thanks to the worsening effects of climate change (though we're not allowed to say that out loud let alone protest about it because that's apparently bad for business). Anyhow, when we hear today's Malachi reading, from the last chapter of our Old Testament, with its threat of judgement by fire, with nothing left of the evildoers but stubble, our newsfeeds and TV bulletins provide ready mental images of that awful day—that *Dies irae*, or day of wrath, as the old Requiem mass text calls it.

Now, here's the question: is this what we're supposed to believe in? Do we have a wrathful God eager to incinerate an evil world while saving the righteous—the same God who once destroyed the world by flood, so the story goes, saving a faithful remnant in Noah's ark? But wait a minute. Today's psalm is also about God's judgement, and about the final triumph of God's justice. But the tone and content are entirely different. Rather than threats of violence, Psalm 98 is a joyful hymn ringing out from all over God's creation—the sea, the land, the rivers, the mountains, and the nations too—celebrating the vindication, liberation, and salvation of God's beloved creation. Not Dionysiac bloodlust, then, but a victory of righteousness in the key of mercy, with no mention of payback and no hint of violence.

So, friends, which of these two images of judgement do we go with—Malachi, chapter 4, or Psalm 98? I suggest we heed both of them, but that we interpret the Malachi passage carefully. Psalm 98 with its imagery of joy and peace gives us permission to question the literal truth of Malachi's dark vision, reminding us that God's judgement is good news for the world, not bad news. So we take our Malachi reading today seriously but we don't take it literally. We hold onto the promise of justice and the truth of judgement that Malachi offers, but we see it more positively, in terms of lies and abuse finally exposed and disempowered. As for Malachi's fire of judgement, this is best understood spiritually, as a purgative and purifying image,

heralding the painful challenge to our pride and self-delusion well known to all those who take God seriously. Hence I see God's judgement as a bonfire of the vanities, to borrow Tom Wolfe's title, painful and necessary and bad news for our pretensions, but by no means a literal cataclysm. God's judgement is an invitation to life lived more honestly and more fully, rather than a sentence of death.

Now, all that's by way of background to what I want to say about today's gospel. It would be a mistake if we read today's Gospel as Jesus threatening to unleash hell—a phrase Fr Martin used last week, channelling Russell Crowe from the movie *Gladiator*. So how about we read it differently? How about we understand the temple and its destruction in anthropological terms, as a transition away from the stable and familiar structures of sacrificial religion, which of course the temple was all about? And how about we understand the apocalyptic woes that Jesus lists for us today in terms of a world gone off the rails—in terms of the kind of things that panicked human beings typically do to each other rather than things an angry God is likely to inflict on us?

So let's start with the temple, which is the key to today's gospel, and how to conceive of it. First off, it's a mistake to liken the temple in Jerusalem to a cathedral, for instance. It was more like an abattoir—an industrial-sized meatworks where the nation, the King and all the

people were reconciled to God by the priests cutting animals' throats, burning their flesh, and sprinkling their blood day in day out. The temple, that necessarily magnificent symbol of social stability, functioned to preserve society from its internal violence by bloody ritual with the support of high-sounding mythology. And it was all based on making sacrificial victims, though of course it replaced ancient pagan human sacrifice with rituals of animal sacrifice.

But put an end to the temple, as Jesus warns in today's gospel, take away the sacrificial production line of temple ritual, and where does all society's violence go? Take away the stable religious centre of every community and what keeps it anchored and pacified? Hence Jesus in today's gospel predicts the likely human consequences of what he's doing, as he sets about drawing the old temple religion to a close. Jesus takes the trainer wheels off human religion and culture, and we've been wobbling along unsteadily ever since.

As a result we live in a world less able to channel its envy, rivalry and violence outside of the community. Of course we still try to expel our violence to our borders and beyond our borders. We had centuries of exporting our violence to the colonies and to overseas wars, and now we see violence exported to detention centres along America's Southern border or, thanks to our own enlightened policy, to bleak gulags in the Pacific. René Girard says that animals mark the

boundaries of their territory with excrement, while we humans mark the borders of our territory with sacrificial victims—with society's excrement.

This is how we vainly try to keep the sacrificial engine running, but the different thing today is that thanks to Jesus' impact our society is now alert to the making of victims, so it's very rare for us to have a scapegoat who everyone can agree is guilty. The scapegoats are speaking up, the graves are being opened and the hidden victims are coming to light—as Matthew's Gospel imagines it on Good Friday.

Jesus knows that he's precipitating a crisis, as well as providing humanity with a way out of that crisis through faith in him and through repentance. Only that way can we begin to do the human thing in a new way, without the structuring violence of scapegoating. And this explains the apocalyptic imagery in today's Gospel—all the woes that will befall the world after the temple and all it stands for is brought to an end. The apocalyptic images of earthquakes and famines and dreadful portents from heaven in today's gospel are typical mythological images of social collapse, and we're given a hint about that by wars being mentioned first.

Now, if I'm reading all this the right way, it helps us make sense of Jesus' teaching in the bulk of today's gospel about what his disciples

should be anticipating in the face of these altered conditions, and here's where you and I receive our instructions.

Jesus warns his followers that they'll be persecuted by friends and family, also by civil and religious authorities. Every social crisis intensifies scapegoating, and the search for suitable sacrificial victims, to feed the mob the blood it needs so it won't turn on itself. And Jesus warns Christians in today's gospel that they'll fit the bill: "You will be hated by all because of my name."

In particular, Christians are hated and persecuted in many places for standing up against just this sort of scapegoating violence: as German theologian Jürgen Moltmann put it, for standing up for the coming truth against the ruling lie. No-one likes to have their warped values and practices called into question. So while Australian Christians needn't expect to have to give up their lives, which is one of the consequences Jesus warns about in today's gospel, we can't escape seeing our faith and our allegiance to the way of Christ regularly mocked and derided.

This warning helps explain something else that Jesus says, earlier in today's gospel, and echoed in our second Thessalonians reading. Jesus warns against false prophets telling us that the end is near—against wrongheaded attempts to maintain our purity inviolate,

perhaps, so Christians will think that it's OK for us to keep our heads down, our hands clean and our mouths shut, waiting in splendid isolation as the world goes to hell around us. What's going on here?

Well, in 2 Thessalonians today Paul is still working on the problem that Fr Martin mentioned last week, about the first generation of Christians dying off without Jesus having returned. Today Paul warns the Thessalonian church about members who are just sitting back waiting for the imminent end, without working for a living and pulling their weight, and perhaps sponging off others in the Church. But Paul, like Jesus, offers no way out of having to struggle with difficult realities, with no end in sight. Paul was trying to get across to those early Christians that the Church has to settle down for the long haul of history, with no room for a free ride, or for any escapist spirituality. Jesus too warns against this spirit of escapism, as if Christians can expect an easy time of it when his own witness against the powers and principalities brought him to the cross.

So, friends, this is what our apocalyptic set of readings is telling us today. Jesus has helped make the world both a more dangerous place and a more hopeful place. The world can learn to leave structuring violence and invincible ignorance behind if we follow Jesus' path of non-rivalrous, self-giving love, and we make a dreadful apocalypse for ourselves whenever we refuse that message. But

there's also God's vindication to be kept in view, as we see it so beautifully set out in Psalm 98 this morning, and as ever in the words and liturgical actions of our Eucharist. God's judgement is ultimately good news, not bad news. Judgement is a dimension of God's salvation, not an alternative to it. The *Dies irae*, the day of wrath, is more comprehensively understood as a *Dies pacificae*, a day of peace, as Jürgen Moltmann memorably puts it. And so you and I can take courage today—courage for the challenging life to which Christ has called us, marking us out in our baptism as witnesses to the coming truth against the ruling lie.

The Lord be with you ...