

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Nov. 17/2013

Malachi 4: 1-2; 2 Thessalonians 3: 7-12; Luke 21: 5-19

Introduction

Someone asked: “What would you like people to say about you as you’re lying in your casket?” One person said: “I’d like them to say that I was a caring person.” Another said: “I’d like them to say that I had done some things to make this world a better place.” A third person said: “I’d like them to say, look, I think he’s moving.”

As we near the end of another year it is time for us to reflect, not only on what our personal legacy is going to be, but even more on where our world is going. Sometimes we are told that things are getting steadily better, that a particular invention, or perhaps a political program or a popular movement is “creating a better world for all of us.” We ourselves sing in Church, “Let us build the City of God.” Is our world getting better? It was the 18th century German philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel who promoted the idea that, not only is our world getting better but that it is bound to get better. Is this true? Today’s Scripture readings strongly suggest that it is not.

The Readings

Consider the *Old Testament* reading: It is about 500 B.C. The Jews are home after 70 years of exile in Babylon. They have returned full of dreams but are disillusioned now. They find themselves facing the same old situation: the wicked prospering and the good suffering. Malachai doesn’t tell them things will get better. Instead he reminds them there will be a day of reckoning when all will have to face the judgment of God.

Look at the *New Testament* reading: Paul finds many Christians expecting that the end of this world and the appearance of Christ as Judge will happen soon. So they have quit their jobs and are just sitting around waiting. He tells them they have a responsibility to work, to remain involved in the life of this world, to do their part.

Then consider the *Gospel* reading: Many Jews are impressed by the progress in their country. They look in awe at the great city of Jerusalem, especially its magnificent Temple, one of the wonders of the ancient world. Jesus tells them it will all be destroyed, as in fact happened in the Roman siege of 70 A.D. At the same time he tells them they should not just sit around waiting for this world to end. They have a role to carry out in our world: actively bear witness to the Gospel, even in the face of persecution.

What Should Our Attitude Be?

Should we just do our best to reach eternal life and leave this world to God’s final judgment, or is there hope of making this world a better place? Is real earthly progress possible? What does the Church teach?

First, there clearly is such a thing as scientific and technological progress. A lot of newer things are better. All of us are thankful for modern medicine, our improved food production, our transportation, our computers and cell phones. Yet as Vatican II pointed out, technological progress is not the same thing as the growth of the Kingdom of God. Our technology is ambiguous. Besides the good it has brought it has also given us the atom bomb, global warming, genetic engineering and a more dangerous world.

Second, the most important kind of progress, the growth of the Kingdom of God, i.e. God's reign over human hearts and human institutions is primarily something that God does, working by grace in human hearts and minds. Yet God's grace can be rejected or trivialized by any one of us. Are the minds, hearts of most people in our world more open to God's grace today? That's a hard question. Some signs suggest they are not.

Third, is the human race making some genuine moral and social progress? There are success stories: the almost universal end of slavery, the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, greater room for many people to decide their own political future. Yet we also have a very flawed sense of what is meant by a human right, as seen in the widespread acceptance of abortion and euthanasia, the trivialization of sexuality, the breakdown of stable marriage, the promotion of greed that destroys the lives of the poor. There is the widespread loss of a sense of God and the falling off of religious practice.

What Should We Do?

First, our social teaching does call on us to seek out common ground wherever we can in order to work with other people of good will in creating social institutions, laws and practices that will help people everywhere to live genuinely human lives. This is a difficult road but an essential one. The Christian duty to love calls us to pursue both charity and justice.

Second, we need to make sure we do not commit ourselves without reservation to any particular ideology or political platform. We are first of all Christians, and the Christian and Catholic concept of what is meant by a human right and by the common good, for example, is very different from what we find in many secular movements.

Third, in line with what Jesus says in today's Gospel, we must be ready in many situations to stand up and be counted in clear opposition to some of the directions our culture is taking. We may not be facing actual persecution for being Christians but we must be ready to take stands that will be unpopular and uncomfortable. We have to be and look different. Jesus tells us today that we must be ready even to be betrayed by relatives and friends. That sounds pretty dramatic, but it makes the point that if we want to do some real good for this world we need the courage to be genuine witnesses.

Conclusion

Finally, green, the liturgical colour at this time of year, is the colour of hope. Relying on the Lord, it reminds us, we should be people of hope.