

Reflection for 16th November (Second Sunday before Advent)

In this pre-Advent season, our readings begin to turn to thoughts of what are sometimes called “the four last things”: death, judgement, heaven and hell. Today in our Gospel reading, however, Jesus warns his followers not to get too absorbed in the “signs of the end”, but to keep going as normal.

As always, there are two sides to this theme, as we see in our reading from the prophet Malachi. There is the destructive, searing fire, burning up the field of stubble. We have to face its uncompromising message – all arrogance and wrongdoing will be uprooted and destroyed. God cannot abide it: it has to go.

But God’s righteousness is not confined to the searching condemnation of evil. The other side is Malachi’s image of light and healing, whereby God vindicates victims against their oppressors, rights all wrongs and redeems those who are enslaved. God’s justice will bring healing to the hurt, courage to those in despair and hope to the depressed. So instead of seeing the day when God comes to judge the world as solely a day of threat, we are encouraged to experience the day of God’s judgement as the dawn of righteousness and a time of healing and restoration.

If we believe that God will come to be our judge, what is the implication of this for us now, apart from sifting through our memories and seeking forgiveness for the things of which our consciences accuse us? What can we actually do? Well, how about standing up for the victims of injustice? Some of them may be close at hand, and we may be in just the right place to stand up for them and defend their rights. Others may be far away, and we may have the chance to support them by contributing to a charity. Or how about doing something for people who find this time of year difficult – cheering up someone who is miserable or lonely, offering a sympathetic ear to someone who is having problems, or giving a hand to someone who cannot manage by themselves?

If we see God’s judgement solely as a threat, we can easily become paralysed into inactivity, like the proverbial rabbit caught in the headlights. Certainly, we cannot face God’s justice directly, any more than we can look directly at the sun. But the one we have to face is, as Malachi says, the sun of righteousness, who rises with healing in his wings: and in him we see the face of Jesus Christ, who suffered, who brought our forgiveness, and now lives to be our advocate, our rescuer and our healer.

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