
WORD MADE FLESH

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Spiritual Maternity*

Malachi 1:14-2:2; 8-10; 1 Thess. 2:7-9,13; Matthew 23:1-12

When our life is in God, present to the Kingdom of God, it is illumined by God's glory alone. It is a life concerned only for the spiritual birth of those it touches. Spiritual maternity, midwifery and birth-giving, stand at the centre of the spiritual life and of today's readings. "Paternity," that ancient "image of generation" of which many have become so deeply suspicious in our day, is the preserve of the Divine, the mystery beyond human comprehension.

Today's texts are about spiritual maternity, midwifery and birth-giving, and the dangers of thinking that we, as faithful disciples, are spiritual progenitors. The prophet Malachi gives voice to the Divine and Jesus in the Gospel reflects on spiritual arrogance in his day. Malachi speaks of that most subtle of spiritual conditions in which one does many good and seemingly life-giving things, where spiritual leadership is expressed, clothed in all the appearances of righteousness. Yet, they are done without God's glory. If the glory that appears to illumine the way we touch the lives of others, if that glory is not the glory of God, then even our blessing of the world becomes the occasion of curse. Spiritual actions done out of our own paternity, generated within ourselves, while having all the appearance of the Christ-like life, will finally cause others to stumble. They are, as God says in Malachi, a "corrupting of the covenant," corrupting the very avenues of communion with the Divine. This is spiritual sin of the first order.

Jesus, in the Gospel, has a devastating critique of many forms of spiritual paternity. While calling on his disciples and the people to follow the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, because they "sit in Moses' chair," he points out that they "do not practice what they teach." They are unwilling to lift a finger to help with the "heavy burdens, hard to bear" that they lay on the shoulders of others. They do their good deeds as models to be seen by others, seek the place of honour and insist on being called by their titles. "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father - the one in heaven." The greatest among you, the Gospel goes on to proclaim, "will be your servant." "Midwifery," spiritual maternity, is the sole stance of the person who is present to the glory of God, living in the Kingdom of God.

Even the image of God's paternity is turned around for us in today's Psalm and in the Second Reading, written to the fledgling community at Thessalonica in Macedonia. David, the Psalmist, sings of the spiritual journey, of "not [going] after things too great nor marvels beyond me," of the soul set "in silence and peace." "A weaned child on its mother's breast, even so is my soul," he sings. St. Paul, speaking of the Apostles, depicts their "leadership" not in terms characteristic of teachers or authorities, but "like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children" sharing not only the Gospel but oneself.

Whatever the debate about the Fatherhood of God in our day, the spiritual life is always a matter of maternity, midwifery and birth-giving. The servant to life is the greatest among us, resting solely in the glory of God.

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