
WORD MADE FLESH

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Utopian Dream or Christian Apocalypse? *

Malachi 3:19-20, 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19

Just before the feast of Christ the King and the entrance into Advent, the little Lent, and the preparations for the feast of the Incarnation, we are faced with these apocalyptic texts. These are texts on the end of history.

Reading Malachi is like holding fire in the hand as he speaks of the "day that is coming" in which "all the arrogant and the evil-doers will burn" and nothing of their works will remain, "neither root nor stalk. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will shine out with healing in its rays."

The Apostles were faced with many problems in the fledgling churches of their day, because some zealous Christians, believing they were living "in the end times," refused to do what was necessary to keep body and soul together. They gave all their attention to what they understood the requirements to be for the faithful servant waiting of the bridegroom, for the return of the messiah. Think for a moment of how often we have had our lives and the lives of others devoured by utopian dreams literally understood. The Apostles have no time for it. Happy to give to the beggar on the street, they are firm in their rule for the church, "not to let anyone have any food if he/she refused to do any work." This is a matter of spiritual discipline within the church community, addressing those who would turn the Gospel into utopian dream. It is not an injunction about ministering to the poor and needy to whom we, as Christ made so eminently clear, will give the coat off our back.

Christ's call does not point to the end of some historical era. The meaning of Christian apocalypticism, as opposed to utopian dreams for the future, is present in the Gospel. The end of time is not foretold by revolutions and wars, by the plunder of nation by nation, great earthquakes, plagues and famines. Whatever these may suggest about the movement of history is of no consequence to the actions and plight of the follower of Christ. The faithful will be seized and persecuted, tried before ecclesial bodies and governments "because of my name." But this does not signal the end of time. "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relations and friends; and some of you will be put to death. You will be hated by all men on account of my name, but not a hair of your head will be lost. Your endurance will win you your lives." Those touched by the Gospel have already stepped outside the framework of their society's history and self-understanding, have stepped outside of time into the eternal. They respond to the incidents of life with divine love, with blessing and healing without regard for social and cultural norms. For so doing they easily become the prey of the well-established, the guardians of society, class, and cultural fashion. But these persecutions are only an "opportunity to bear witness." The eternal is already present.

The Christian is baptized into the kingdom of God and lives that kingdom in the midst of time and history, but not prejudiced by the temporal fashions of the day. The historical and cultural fashions which determine so much of the accepted responses of the day are grounded in self-interest. To live in the kingdom of God, the kingdom of loving communion, is to do that which affirms and calls forth life, brings creation to its fullness. Even if the personal cost of living "in Christ's name," living the life of forgiveness, blessing and healing, as the Gospel tells us, even if the cost is one's life, "not a hair of your head will be lost." All that is real in my life and yours is so because it is understood and finds its being in the self-giving love that calls creation into the fullness of itself.

Malachi made it clear at the beginning when he spoke of how that which is evil is burned root and stalk but that which is of God, that which is called forth in divine love, "bears healing in its wings" for our wounded world.

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