

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Malachi 1:14-2:2,8-10; Ps 131 (130); 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9,13; Matthew 23:1-12

And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—in heaven

Matt 23:1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students (lit. *brothers and sisters*). 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The risk of a reading like this is to leave it comfortably in the past or to apply it to others in the present. In any case, nothing to do with me/us!!! There is also a risk that we may feel quite uneasy with the blunt attack on the Pharisees, given the history of Christian treatment of Jews. Even though this kind of writing undoubtedly encouraged later anti-semitism, nevertheless, such critiques can easily be paralleled in the biblical prophets.

KIND OF WRITING

Our reading comes from the fifth narrative section of the Gospel. The usual pattern is found: a narrative (19:3-24:2) followed by an extended discourse (24:3-25:46). The narrative unfolds in two parts as follows:

19:3-20:34 *Household teaching*
 19:3-12 Divorce
 19:13-15 Children
 19:16-20:16 Money
 20:17-28 Servants
 20:29-34 Heart of discipleship

21:1-24:2: *Judgment in the present*
 21:1-11 Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem
 21:12-22 Day 1 in Jerusalem
 21:23-24:2 Day 2 in Jerusalem

Day 2 follows this sequence:

21:23-23:39 Entering the temple
 21:23-22:46 Jesus’ authority
 23:1-39 *Against the Pharisees*
 24:1-2 Leaving the temple

Chap. 23 itself breaks into the following moments:

vv. 1-12 *To the crowds and the disciples*
 vv. 13-36 *To the scribes and Pharisees*
 vv. 37-39 *To Jerusalem*

It is worth remembering where Matthew is coming from. Writing for a seemingly prosperous community in Antioch in Syria made up of Jews and Gentiles, Matthew is in competition with the “synagogue across the road.” The very sharp critique would in that case reflect the fact that the “Christian group” had only recently broken away from the parent religion. The bitter taste of a fresh schism may be detected in the writing. While there is some parallel material in Mark 12:37-40 and Luke 20:45-47, Matthew 23 seems to be largely the composition of the evangelist. Finally, the lectionary offers us vv. 1-12. Vv. 1-7 criticise the ostentation of the scribes and the Pharisees, while vv. 8-12 offer guidelines for distinctly alternative behaviour.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

On phylacteries
 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord

Thought for the day

Leadership is an issue in our world today: home, work, society, church. Two of our readings are quite stark critiques—the priests in the temple and the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. There’s plenty to reflect on for us today. Jesus does offer an alternative and we see that alternative in action in the second reading. Paul was a passionate pastor, who clearly loved those he served and gave himself fully to them and for them. He could be upset, as well, and angry at times, but always because he cared so deeply. For most of us not in leadership, the question is how can we help those in leadership to fulfil their role in a gospel manner?

Prayer

Good shepherd, bless the shepherds who care for us in your name. Help us also to know how we can enable truly Christian leadership in our time.

your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4-9; cf. Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16; Deut 11:13-21.)

On fringes and tassels

The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God.

(Num 15:37–41; cf. Deut 22:12.)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Did Jesus wear such fringes?

Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the *fringe of his cloak*. (Matt 9:20)

After the people of that place recognised him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and begged him that they might touch even the *fringe of his cloak*; and all who touched it were healed. (Matt 14:35–36)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 18:1–4)

But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matt 20:25–28)

ST PAUL

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relationship to God and know his will and approve the superior things because you receive instruction from the law, and if you are convinced that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an educator of the senseless, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the essential features of knowledge and of the truth— therefore you who teach someone else, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who tell others not to commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonour God by transgressing the law! For just as it is written, “the name of God is being blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (Rom 2:17–24)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The audience of this first sec-

tion is identified.

Verse 2 It is unclear whether the seat is literal or metaphorical. Either way, it was a position of authority.

Verse 3 The authority of the Pharisees is (perhaps ironically) acknowledged and then Jesus notices the gap between saying and doing. Such a charge could be levelled against spiritual leaders of the time, such as the scribes or indeed the popular philosophies. There is a difficulty with the command to listen to what they say because elsewhere in Matthew the contrary is recommended as, for example, in Mt 15:3-9 and 16:11-12.

Prophets occasionally use such reverse commands to make their point more sharply. For example, the biting invitation of Amos: *Come to Bethel—and transgress; to Gilgal—and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; bring a thank-offering of leavened bread, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel! says the Lord God.* (Amos 4:4–5; cf. also Jeremiah 44:25-26.)

Verse 4 This is not unknown in other traditions! Contextually, the historical Pharisees were trying to bring the holiness of Temple into people’s everyday lives, by means of many rules and regulations. Such detailed prescriptions could easily end up on the obsessive end of the meticulous. Contrast Mt 11:28-30.

Verse 5a A general principle is given before the examples which substantiate it. Such hypocrisy is a risk affecting all religious external practice. Cf. Mt 6:2-6. A section of the Talmud was devoted to “the plague of Pharisees” in which one type is identified as motivated by show. “King Jannaeus said to his wife, ‘Fear not the Pharisees and the non-Pharisees but the hypocrites who ape the Pharisees.’” (*Talmud Sotah* 22b).

Verses 5b-7 The list is comprehensive, moving from personal appearances, to social engagement and ending with interpersonal interaction. The Pharisees were genuinely held in high esteem and the temptation to enjoy such status would have been great. A farmer in Doneraile once put it to me thus, “we put priests on a pedestal and they enjoyed it.” Rabbi was generic before the fall of Jerusalem but after AD 70 it tended to be restricted to religious teachers.

Verses 8-10 The Matthean church has an embryonic structure made up of *scribes* (13:52; 23:34), *prophets* (10:41; 23:34), *sages* (23:34) and *teachers* (28:20;

5:19). People in those positions are warned here not to take titles like rabbi, father or instructor. Of course, the roles had to have names—so that people can refer to them. Furthermore, if we called absolutely no one “father” we simply would not be able to call God our father. Again, Matthew has taken aim at the leadership, no doubt including himself.

Verse 11 This teaching is found in the instructions on discipleship (see above). Leadership in the Christian context is always meant to be service, not power.

Verse 12 This verses then summarises the teaching in vv. 8-10 and looks back over vv. 1-12 as a whole. The proverb was known also in the popular philosophies of time: *Zeus humbles the exalted and exalts the humble* according to Diogenes Laertius (AD 180- 240).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. When our actions match our words about gospel values, then our words carry more weight. Recall people whom you admired for this quality. Perhaps your own experience at times confirms this.
2. Jesus also has hard words for those whose priority lies in cultivating flattery and attention. Even for the people honoured such words and gestures can have an empty feeling. How much better for us to be comfortable in our own skin, recognising our goodness, and acknowledging our limitations.
3. Our passage ends with a paradox. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. For Jesus, the way to greatness and a full life is through service of others. When have you found the way of service brought unexpected rewards?

PRAYER

Sovereign God, we have no father but you, no teacher but Christ.

Conform our lives to the faith we profess, preserve us from arrogance and pride, and teach us in Christ the greatness of humility and service.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

We too constantly thank God that when you received God's message

1 Thess 2:5 *For we never appeared with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is our witness— 6 nor to seek glory from people, either from you or from others, 7 although we could have imposed our weight as apostles of Christ; instead we became little children among you. Like a nursing mother caring for her own children, 8 with such affection for you we were happy to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. 9 For you recall, brothers and sisters, our toil and drudgery: By working night and day so as not to impose a burden on any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and so is God, as to how holy and righteous and blameless our conduct was toward you who believe. 11 As you know, we treated each one of you as a father treats his own children, 12 exhorting and encouraging you and insisting that you live in a way worthy of God who calls you to his own kingdom and his glory. 13 And so we too constantly thank God that when you received God's message that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human message, but as it truly is, God's message, which is at work among you who believe.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Today's reading offers a tremendous insight in to Paul as pastor. It challenges us too in our own notions of what it means to be of loving service to people.

KIND OF WRITING

In the *apologia* of chapters 2 and 3, Paul uses with great cultural sensitivity the language of Cynic philosophy. The Cynics (who were not cynics in our sense) often protested their genuineness and authenticity, as does Paul here. This passage is also full of the language of emotion and feeling, such as *affection, caring, dear* as well as family metaphors, such as children, mother and father. Nevertheless, this is the passage which indicates greatest unease between Paul and the Christ-believers in Thessalonica.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Apart from the story of the somewhat unsteady relations between the Thessalonians and Paul, there is a particular feature here which bears comment. In an honour / shame society, to give is to honour the giver and place the receiver

in a lesser position ("shame"). The social balance requires that those who receive should also be able to hold their heads up by making some return, however little. In Thessalonica, Paul "gave" to the Thessalonians the immense gift of the Gospel. They desired to make some monetary gesture to redress the imbalance thus created. However, the apostle refused money from them and in this way left imbalance as it was, breaking a cultural norm. This caused considerable irritation and Paul felt that, as part of the general restoration of relationships, he should also defend himself *against the accusation of taking nothing in return!*

RELATED PASSAGES

Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel *should get their living by the gospel.* (1 Cor 9:12-14)

Stay in that same house, eating and drinking what they give you, *for the worker deserves his pay.* (Luke 10:7; cf. Mt 10:10 and 1 Tim 5:18)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 5-6 Some of the popular philosophers flattered the audience in order to get more material support from them. Paul's lack of flattery is evidence of lack of greed. Paul's first defence is that he took no money because he was not greedy. It would be hard for the Thessalonians not to be against greed! Not only did he not seek money, neither did he desire status among them. "God is our witness" is an oath.

Verse 7 Paul is aware that the labourers are worthy of their wages (see 1 Cor 9:12-14 and Lk 10:7 above). He is aware that they wanted to give and, even more, he had the right to received. So, why not? The answer is in several steps. Rather than the imposing apostle, Paul became like a little children. The reference to our Lord's teaching leads to a rich exploration of family language. The mother in this case is a wet nurse, paid to breastfeed the offspring of others. But

when she comes to feed her own children, she does not expect to be paid. The metaphor is powerful and precise.

Verse 8 This verse makes the implicit teaching in v. 7 explicit. His affection is great and because they have become so dear to him, he gives himself without counting the cost, as any parent does.

Verse 9 Paul offers a further defence: he did not want to burden them. The Thessalonians were manual labourers (1 Thess 4:11) and Paul did not want to take from the already poor.

Verses 10-12 These verses (not in lectionary the reading) are a further defence of not taking money. This time Paul uses paternal language: exhorting and encouraging. Again, a father does not expect to be paid for acting as a father...on the contrary!! The family language will take an usual twist in a few verses, where Paul writes: *As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.* (1 Thess 2:17) Having portrayed himself as a mother and a father, he goes back to being a child and declares himself an orphan. Paul is saying that he feels what they feel and he missed them as much as they miss him. In this way, Paul closes the emotional gap between the giver and the receivers.

Verse 13 The final defence is that his ministry was actually effective. They really "got it" and it was still effective among them. His behaviour, therefore, did not at all impede the power of the proclamation.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Who has been a really good "pastor" to you? What image or metaphor comes to mind to describe this person?
2. We are all pastors in some sense. What is your experience of not just serving but really loving the people in your care?
3. How did you come to realise that the Gospel is not some human thinking but God's message?

PRAYER

It is you, O Lord, who are our shepherd, leading us and guiding us through the pastors you send us. Bless all who work among us in your name and may we see in them your love and care. Amen.

Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?

Mal 1:14b I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name is revered among the nations.

Mal 2:1 And now, O priests, this command is for you. 2 If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. 3 *I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence.*

Mal 2:8 But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, 9 and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction. 10 Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our first reading is an attack on failed spiritual leadership, as is today's Gospel reading. There should be no difficulty in applying the readings, alas.

KIND OF WRITING

This short book is structured around six disputes: 1:2–5; 1:6–2:9; 2:10–16; 2:17–3:5; 3:6–12; 3:13–4:3. An introductory verse (1:1) and some concluding verses (4:4–6) function as a frame for the whole. Our reading bridges the second and third disputes.

- 1:2-5 God's love for Israel
- 1:6-2:9 *Priesthood polluted*
- 2:10-16 *Infidelity in Israel*
- 2:17-3:5 Purifying the community
- 3:6-12 Return to the Lord
- 3:13-21 Hope for the faithful
- 3:22-24 Moses and Elijah

The influence of Deuteronomistic material has often been noticed. For example, words such as love, fear and faithfulness, as well as "law of Moses," "all Israel". Malachi even calls Sinai Horeb. The role of the Levites comes from Deut 17:9 and 18:1. Likewise tithing is based on Deut 14:28–29; 26:12–14.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The prophet Malachi is read on only two Sundays in the three-year cycle. The writing is the last of the Twelve Minor Prophets, but, as St Augustine reminds us, they are "called minor from the brevity of their writings" (*City of God*, 18.29), not on account of any lesser significance.

Malachi (= "my messenger"; it is unclear whether it refers to a real name or to the role of the prophet) is almost anonymous. From the book itself, we can tell he was a person of deep personal piety, with a great regard for the holiness of God and a hunger for social justice. His vision is in great continuity with the covenant theology of earlier books of the Bible. The book supports the temple and its functioning, so Malachi may have been a member of the tribe of Levi, though not himself a priest (from the way he lays into them!).

The dating of this book is disputed. The writer does use an Akkadian loan word for governor in 1:8, typical of the Persian period, and by this time the temple has been rebuilt (1:10; 3:1, 10). As a result, many, perhaps most, scholars would place it in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, that is mid-fifth century BC. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi seem related but there is no consensus on this.

RELATED READINGS

Jonah prayed to Yahweh and said, 'Please, Yahweh, isn't this what I said would happen when I was still in my own country? That was why I first tried to flee to Tarshish, since I knew you were a tender, compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, who relents about inflicting disaster. (Jonah 4:2)

You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. (Deut 16:19)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14b In 1:6-14, the charge is made against the priests that the offerings are not of the best quality, as commanded in Lev 22:17-25 and Dt 15:21. Vv. 12-14 largely repeat the charges made in vv. 6-10. V. 13 indicates the the

priests themselves are bored: "*What a weariness this is,*" you say, and you sniff at me, says the Lord of hosts. (Mal 1:13). V. 14 itself is part of a climactic triad of affirmations of God's greatness in Mal 1:5, 11, 14.

Verse 1 The address is directly to the priests.

Verse 2 This is an appeal to listen and convert. The form is a conditional clause ("if") followed by the consequences. Suddenly, we move from a conditional sentence to the indicative mood, "I have cursed them." Curse is the polar opposite of blessing, so these are very harsh words indeed. One commentator asked, would a loving God speak like this? Her answer was as follows: "it is only when God leaves us alone that he no longer loves us." In that sense no is never God's final word to anyone. Cf. Jonah 4:2 above. The lectionary kindly omits v. 3! Vv. 4-7 illustrate Malachi's use of irony.

Verse 8 The three-fold charge could not be more serious. What else are the priests for? They are responsible for the moral and spiritual welfare of the people. If they lose the way themselves... Covenant is a major theme of Malachi. See Mal 2:4–5, 8, 10, 14; 3:1. The covenant indicates a way of living, as well as worshipping within the relationship with YHWH.

Verse 9 A new charge is added: partiality in teaching, the very thing forbidden. See Deut 16:9 above.

Verse 10 It is now the turn of the people in the third dispute. This time *they* question *themselves*. The rhetorical questions call vigorously for a new relationship. Only Malachi in the Twelve speaks of God as father. For "oneness" see Deut 6:4-6, the *Sh'ma Yisrael*.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Am I a faithful member of God's people? A faithful servant and pastor?
2. Do the questions of v. 10 help me reflect on my community of faith?

PRAYER

Great and loving God, you would not be angry with us if you did not care for us. Help us to hear your cry deep within our hearts that we may turn again to you become once more your faithful people.

THE LITURGY

Malachi 1:14-2:2,8-10; Ps 131 (130); 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9,13; Matthew 23:1-12

READINGS 1 AND 3

The two readings match each other in the saltiness of their critique. Again, it is important not to let ourselves off the book by pointing to the past or to others. These words are for me and for us.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 131 (130) doesn't seem to take on board the criticism in Malachi. Instead, it goes a step further and suggest a humble heart, listening ear.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Malachi 1:14-2:2,8-10

The historical context for this reading is the time after the Babylonian Exile. The temple has been rebuilt—but the worship offered is not from the heart. The priests are criticised at the start and then towards the end the people as well.

Second reading

1 Thessalonians 2:7-9,13

What kind of pastor was Paul? We get a great sense of the man's love and energy in this reading. He is responding to an unusual criticism: he has *not* allowed them to give him money.

Gospel

Matthew 23:1-12

There is a risk in all religious leadership of setting yourself somehow apart and then the risk of show or hypocrisy. Jesus noticed it in his time and modelled an alternative leadership, that of service.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 6 November

All Saints of Ireland

Sir 44:1-15

As we listen to this reading, it may help to have in mind not just figures from the distant past but people of faith who have left their mark on me and whom I remember with real gratitude.

Luke 6:11-23

Today we hear the other version of the Beatitudes, from Luke. This time they are fewer—probably close to the original

teaching of Jesus and very direct and practical.

Tuesday 7 November

St Willibrord, bishop and missionary

Romans 12:5-16

How to work together is always an issue in the church. Paul uses the image of the body to show we need all the different gifts, used in harmony.

Luke 14:15-24

We are familiar with banquets as metaphors for the kingdom. In today's reading, it is used as a great warning: those who *think* they are invited or entitled simply may not be.

Wednesday 8 November

Romans 13:8-10

Following Jesus' own example, Paul goes to the heart of the Gospel in a few simple phrases that anyone can understand. The difficulty lies not in understanding but in living it out, as usual.

Luke 14:25-33

The first paragraph will shock and the second paragraph will sound familiar. "Hate" is the strong way of saying "prefer to." Jesus really did set faith relationship above "natural" ones. As for planning and failing to build...all too familiar! The message is sharp: take into account the cost of discipleship.

Thursday 9 November

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica



Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12

Ezekiel offered the suffering people an extraordinary vision of life and healing flowing from God's presence.

1 Cor 3:9-11, 16-17

Who are we really before God? No less than a temple of the Holy Spirit!

John 2:13-32

The Temple action was radical—not an

attack on *abuse* but on the functioning of the Temple as such.

Friday 10 November

St Leo the Great, bishop of Rome and doctor

Romans 15:14-21

Our reading today is part of the conclusion to the major arguments of Romans. We get a window into Paul's understanding of himself, as well as some of the features of the mission, such as always going to new places where the Gospel had not yet been proclaimed.

Luke 17:26-37

The passage has a somewhat threatening presentation—we know neither the day nor the hour. The invitation is not to sleepwalk though life but to be fully alive now in this present moment.

Saturday 11 November

St Martin of Tours, bishop

Romans 16:3-9, 16, 22-27

In the seemingly harmless closing chapter, we learn a lot about St Paul. For instance, he had relatives who were Christians before him, Andronicus and Junias. These are named apostles, although Junias is a woman's name. The naming of so many people shows Paul's familiarity with the Roman community.

Luke 16:9-15

Jesus is super clear on the choices before us all and the illustrations are tough. The reaction of the Pharisees is savage, but Jesus is well able for them (and for us!).

