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"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus." 1 Timothy 2:5

Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we will see in the readings the frailty and difficulty of the Old Testament priesthood. We will learn about Paul's heart in serving the believers in Thessalonica and conclude with Jesus' teaching regarding the prideful religious leaders during the time of His earthly ministry.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The main theme of the Book of Malachi is the corruption that had occurred among the Levitical Priesthood. This was during the time just after the restoration of the temple and walls of Jerusalem as recorded in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The priests were corrupt in many ways including offering animal sacrifices less than perfect animals such as ones that were blind, lame, or sick (Ezra 1:8).
As spiritual leaders, the corruption of the priests extended to the people who withheld their perfect animals and brought the imperfect ones to the them as a less than perfect offering. Such is the indictment brought by God in the opening verse.

First Reading:

> *Malachi 1:14 NAS95 14 "But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord, for I am a great King," says the LORD of hosts, "and My name is feared among the nations."*
> *Malachi 2:1-2 NAS95 1 "And now this commandment is for you, O priests. 2 "If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart to give honor to My name," says the LORD of hosts, "then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart.*
> *Malachi 2:8-10 NAS95 8 "But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the LORD of hosts. 9 "So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people, just as you are not keeping My ways but are showing partiality in the instruction. 10 "Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?*

The lawsuit brought by against the people and the priests was twofold. First, the people brought imperfect sacrifices to the priests and second, the priests went along with this ungodly folly. Beginning in the first verse of chapter 2, God addressed the priests and promised them a curse unless they "take heart to give honor to My name" (v. 1). Verses 3 -7, which were omitted from the reading, continued the theme of God's curse upon the priests. These intervening verses also included a reminder about God's original call to Levi who had himself walked with God in purity, provided true instruction, and "turned many from iniquity" (Ezra 2:6). When we pick up again in verse 8 the indictment continues against the corrupted priesthood. God says they "have corrupted the covenant of Levi" after which God "despised and abased [them] before the people" (v. 9). In closing, God reminded them of their fatherhood in God the Father who created them and the fact that they had profaned their covenant with Him (v. 10).

The big idea in the reading is the moral decline of the spiritual leadership of the Nation which caused the violation of their covenant with God who created them (v. 10). In light of the whole biblical context the

priesthood the human priesthood founded upon Levi was always beset by sin because of the weakness inherent in every human being (except Jesus). We see this in the Book of Hebrews where it says about these priests, "he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness" (Hebrews 5:2). The Old Testament priests, even with all their failings and sin, pointed the way towards the coming Perfect, High Priest Jesus. God called the people under the authority of those priests to look beyond their earthly ministry and rather towards Jesus, the "author and finisher of their faith" (Hebrews 12:2).

As we reflect upon the declining morality and evil among the priests in today's Old Testament reading, we aren't to ignore the sinful behavior of the priests. Rather, we are to understand that the prophets predicted this spiritual decline of the Israelites and that it would culminate with the murder of the Greatest Prophet of them all, Jesus (Isaiah 53:8-9). In our day, we must recognize the prophecy that the world will grow worse and worse with evil men and seducers misleading many until the return of the Lord Jesus (2 Timothy 3:13).

In contrast to the imperfect priesthood of the Old Testament, God has provided us with a Great High Priest, Jesus the Son of God (Hebrews 4:14). Jesus is the last and only priest in the line of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:15-16), something totally unique because it was in the line of Judah not Levi. Jesus, the "antitype" of Melchizedek the King of Jerusalem from way back during the time of Abraham, is the final, one and only High Priest Who is also a King. Jesus, called the Son of David some seventeen times in the New Testament, fulfills the prophecy made by Malachi just a few verses past the ending of today's reading. "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1).

Introduction to the Second Reading:
The context second reading from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians was his explanation to the church there about how the Gospel came to them. Early on in this chapter he reminded them about how the good news came amongst severe opposition, and how he came with gentleness of speech (vv. 5-7). He also affirmed how he was "approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel" (v. 4a).
We include verses 10 – 12 from the text which were omitted from the lectionary.

Second Reading:

> *1 Thessalonians 2:7-13 NAS95 7 But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. 8 Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. 9 For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; 11 just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, 12 so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. 13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.*

Paul explained to the Thessalonians how he gently cared for his flock gently, like a "nursing mother" (v. 7b) while working to support himself such as not to be a burden to them (v. 9b). Paul led the church by setting the example of godly behavior while encouraging others to do the same (vv. 10 -11). Finally, Paul commends the believers for receiving his message not just as his words, but as the word given from God (v. 13).

Paul recognized that his message of the Gospel, the good news, was divinely given to him not as the words of men, like the philosophers of the day, but rather as the Word of God. Saint Peter later affirmed this fact when he said, "just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16b-17, emphasis added). Paul recognized that the power of his ministry and the empowerment of the believers came not from man but from God Himself.

God calls us as believers to look beyond the human sources of His message and instead towards God Himself. As fellow ministers of the Gospel we are to follow Paul's example of pointing people to focus not upon ourselves but rather upon God's message sent through us. We are to walk humbly before God and not be burdensome to those whom we may be discipling as well as to be very careful in our behavior since we represent the image of Christ until His return. This is an important point to remember especially in terms when we find ourselves relying perhaps too heavily upon the personality of a spiritual leader wherefore we at least partially forsake the source of their message. This is true even when the message the leader brings to us is completely true. However, the same caution applies even more profoundly when the spiritual leader upon whom we are relying presents a message contradictory to the clear teaching of Scripture. This is what we will explore in next in the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
Just before today's reading the Pharisees had heard that Jesus had "silenced the Sadducees" (Matt 22:34), who were the ruling body of the Jews referred to throughout the Bible as the "scribes." This provoked the Pharisees to further attack Jesus for His teachings throughout the balance of chapter 22. Jesus then silenced the Pharisees, at least for a time. Matthew said, "And no one was able to answer Him a word" (Matt 22:46a). Jesus' argument with them was regarding the Sonship of the Messiah, ultimately the divinity of the "Son of David" (Matt 22:42b). Jesus quoted from Psalm 110 in order to show the Pharisees that the "Christ," or Messiah, was both the Lord God and the Son of David, therefore the Son of God. This was a profound statement of Jesus' divinity because Jesus' nemesis the Pharisees knew that the people recognized Him as the Christ. Matthew recorded this earlier when, "the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David'" (Matt 21:15). Although many of the common people understood that Jesus was the Messiah, the scribes and the Pharisees most certainly did not. Further, all of these spiritual leaders, misunderstood the nature of the promised Messiah of God, expecting more a civil leader Who would overthrow the rulership of the Romans.

Jesus' had earlier responded to the Jews' question regarding whether He was the Messiah. We see in John's Gospel where they asked Him, "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" (John 10:24c). Jesus responded by telling them, "I told you, and you do not believe" (John 10:25a). Jesus explained His divinity to them further, saying "I and the Father are one" "John 10:30). This created a further division between the believers whom Jesus calls His sheep (John 10:3), and the unbelievers, the thieves or robbers (John 10:8). This division between the sheep and the goats (the nonbelievers) is a continuing theme throughout the Gospels, especially in John, for example in John 6:66, where most of Jesus' disciples walked away from Him.

Gospel Reading:

> *Matthew 23:1-12 NAS95 1 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, 2 saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; 3 therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. 4 They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. 5 But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. 6 They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. 8 But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. 11 But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."*

Jesus opened the reading by lumping together the ruling body of the Sadducees (the scribes) and the legalistic lay people (the Pharisees) into a single ruling body who held sway over the spiritual beliefs of the of the people (vv. 2-3). He told the crowds how the religious authorities positioned themselves in the seat of spiritual power (v. 2), while living lives of hypocrisy (v. 4). These leaders did things to be noticed (vv. 5 – 8) while coveting titles such as "Rabbi," "Father," and leader (vv. 7 – 10). Jesus taught the people that they were not to assign honor to these ungodly spiritual leaders who coveted these titles. Rather, they were to reserve such honor only to 1. the Father in Heaven (v. 8), 2. the One Leader Jesus Christ (v. 10), and 3. by implication the Holy Spirit as Teacher (v. 8b). Finally, Jesus affirmed the true problem of the false religious leaders, their pride (v. 12).

What does Jesus message mean to us today, are we not to call anyone father, leader, or teacher? Many of us have had, or have had spiritual fathers. Any of us who have been blessed to know their early father most certainly call him father. We see in the Scriptures that Saint Paul called himself both "father" (1 Corinthians 4:15, Philippians 2:22), and teacher (1 Timothy 2:7, 2 Timothy 1:11). And whom among us has never called their teacher, teacher? No, Jesus is telling us something else.

In light of the biblical context, and including all of the readings that we have considered today, what Jesus is teaching is an admonition against given anyone in a position of spiritual leadership **inappropriate** honor. Spiritual leaders most certainly play an important role in our lives, as do our human fathers and teachers. However, in today's reading Jesus calls us to look behind the humanity of those people, and towards the message of God and taught to us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' day, the scribes and Pharisees were held by the people as the unquestionable religious authorities, not as we see them as the hypocrites described by Jesus with the benefit of 2,000 years of hindsight. Had the Jews in biblical times not obeyed these teachers they would have been subject to great scorn, discipline, and possibly even expulsion from the Jewish community. Such can be the case for us today should we reject the teachings of any spiritual leader who contradicts the clear teachings of Scripture. The Pharisees clearly did contradict Scripture, as Jesus earlier had told them that they were of their father the devil (John 8::44). In our day, God calls us to use spiritual discernment, to "test all things and hold fast that which is true" (1 Thess 5:21).

As believers in the finished work of the Lord Jesus on the cross Who bore the penalty for our sins, we can trust that Jesus has perfectly completed the work began by the imperfect priests we read about in the first reading. These human priests, beset by sins as all humans are (Romans 3:23), pointed the way to the perfect, sinless King Priest. The priests' repeated sacrifices never took away the people's sins, it was just a covering until Jesus came. We see this in the Book of Hebrews:

> *Hebrews 10:1-4 NAS95 1 For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

The priestly system under the Law pointed the way towards the one single, bloody sacrifice of Jesus who willingly presented Himself on the cross in order to bear our sins. Jesus willingly gave His life and poured out His blood for us, because "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin" (Hebrews 9:22). As Christians we remember Jesus' sacrifice for us each time we take communion, until the time when Jesus returns.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw the corruption of the Levitical Priesthood. In verse 10 the text read, "Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?" What does the fatherhood of God for believers have to do with the condemnation that preceded this? What are some ways in which answering this question addressed specifically to the priests speaks to your own life?

2. Considering the difficulties of the human spiritual teachers we saw today, list three ways in which you can find comfort in the perfect, High Priest Jesus who completed the sacrificial system once and for all through the perfect sacrifice of His own body for us.

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