

Introduction:

Your holiness; *Excellenza*; your Grace; My Lord; *monsignore*; Father... Remember these titles as you listen to the Gospel. It should make you wonder: How seriously do we take the Gospel's message?

Gospel and first reading are an attack on different groups whose deeds do not match their words or their esteemed positions.

Paul is more cheerful as he extols the loving faithfulness of the Christians of Thessalonika.

Homily:

Early in the first chapters of the Bible we read the story of Cain and Abel. Cain is a farmer and Abel a shepherd. Both offer sacrifice to God and Abel's is accepted but Cain's rejected. How this was communicated to them and what lay behind God's acceptance of one and rejection of the other is not told. It lies in the mystery of God. Later however, the Rabbis gave an explanation: While Abel offered to God from his flock the best he could, a spotless lamb, Cain offered what he could do without, spoilt goods. God is worthy only of the best. So Cain's offering was rejected and he then compounded his sin of selfishness with the sin of jealousy, and committed the first murder.

Malachi, in the section from which our first reading was taken, challenges the priesthood of his day with the same disregard for God that Cain showed. They are offering God animals which are blind, lame, sick, even stolen. As if God will not notice that they are getting rid of that for which no one has use. Like off loading everything in the larder that has gone a year beyond its sell-by date, and all your broken crockery to the Christmas Fare. Do you think it won't be noticed? Malachi asks. Try making such gifts to your local ruler and see how he responds. See whether you're invited to the next Garden Party he throws. Then comes our passage. A furious assault on men, set apart by birth for sacred office, thus chosen by God, for dereliction of duty.

The charge has, one must admit, a contemporary feel to it.

Malachi's concern is that God is not short changed. God deserves the best we can offer. In his day it meant offering the best from the produce; for us it means that our liturgy is well prepared and enacted with enthusiasm. Such worship lifts the mind and heart to God; it is a grace, a blessing. If the liturgy is ill prepared and slovenly executed it disgraces. The liturgy is not the sole responsibility of priest and choir

leader, server and singer; everyone has a part to play. Enthusiasm is infectious; but so is apathy.

Malachi wants words and actions to match. Jesus echoes the prophet's complaint, though his target is Pharisee and scribe, against whom he will rage in the verses that follow, cursing them with seven woes in language which is uncompromising.

The Pharisees were not bad people. They desired to bring the purity levels of Temple-worship into the home and to all that they did. In the eyes of most people they were models of right conduct, paradigms to be admired whom the peasants could never emulate. Sensitive to every risk of ritual impurity, the Pharisees ate only with their own and so gained their name – the separated.

The scribes were the professionally literate, the secretarial class, in the multiple sense of that word; some were lowly copyists, others were senior civil servants. Like all classes of humanity they would have had pious and devious, haughty and humble among their number.

But polemic does not allow for nice distinctions. At the time Matthew was writing, the young Christian community was striving to establish itself in a hostile pagan world; and the Jewish people were reeling from the cataclysmic destruction of the Temple and the razing of Jerusalem. Sacrifice had ended; the priesthood and the Sadducees had disappeared. The Rabbis, in a way the heirs to the Pharisees, would transform a religion of cult into one of word, rules for regulating behaviour.

The animosity between these two groups in Matthew's world is reflected in these harsh words. Jesus himself disputed with Pharisees but it was Pharisees who warned Jesus of Herod Antipas' intention of killing him, urging him to escape Galilee; and Pharisees had little involvement in Jesus arrest, trial and execution.

Matthew Gospel is written for his community, possibly in Antioch in Syria in the final third of the first century. He would like his community to be a model society where there is no hierarchy, no titles; no 'Your Grace' or '*monsignore*'. He is an idealist and his dreams will not come to pass. Quickly structures appear in the young Church: 'Overseers' and presbyters, deacons and others. Eventually the Church would imitate the Emperor's court and the Pope would be a monarch with all the panoply of kingship; bishops would be princes and abbots the wealthiest of landowners. All in the name of Christ, of course, as another bottle of choicest wine is called for.

My first encounter with a bishop was on a wet street outside St Patrick's Church in Leeds where I knelt to kiss the ring of George Patrick Dwyer. I was doing what I had been instructed to do and he expected nothing less of the eight year old boy and his parents and grandmother. You didn't think of doing anything else to this successor to the Apostles who would drop his crosier on the head or toes of any altar server not quick enough to be in place at the appropriate moment to receive it.

The excesses of the Medieval Church lasted into the 1960's. I watched Pope John XXIII on television carried on the *sedia gestatoria* wafted by ostrich feather fans. Some want such panoply to return.

The Church requires powerful ceremonial; liturgy which touches the emotions. On a grand scale in Papal ceremony and in great reverence here and in every parish church. And this must inspire the main work of the Church which takes place not in Vatican offices nor in curial corridors; the main work of the Church, where the Church is most powerful and effective is where people in the name of Christ help the poor, the sick, the marginalised, those for whom no one has much use, whether it be through a food parcel of the SVP here, or loving AIDS orphans to health in Africa.

Malachi condemned the greedy priests for short changing God, using as offerings in the Temple animals which were blind, lame, sick, unwanted; the same groups who, when human, are the very ones God treasures; ones who have no titles, nor pretensions.