

Have you ever tried to “cram” for a final exam? Pulled an all-nighter, loaded up on caffeine, trying to assimilate as much information as you could because you didn’t review the course material on an ongoing basis throughout the course? I did, once. I was so wired on Coca-Cola I was completely worthless for the next two days. I promised myself I’d never do it again.

Today’s Gospel and first reading are ultimately about THE final exam. Last weekend, this weekend, and next weekend (even our weekday readings this past week) have been about the end times. Much like the words “final exam,” the words “end times” strike us all differently. They both have this tendency to make us fearful. In Hebrew Testament times, when Malachi was writing not long after the Jews were able to return from Babylon and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, the term “Day of the Lord” was the prophetic reference to that great day when God would restore everything that was lost when humankind first sinned. But first, God’s people had to get themselves right with God.

Being taken over by the Babylonians, seeing their Temple and the city of Jerusalem had an impact on the Jewish world of that time similar to the early shock of the attacks on Pearl Harbor or 9/11. In both cases, we came together as a country, set aside our differences, prayed together, resolved to fight against terror. Wasn’t it great that we were, for the most part, all working as one, united in a common purpose, vowing to “never forget”. Guess what? We forgot. It didn’t take long to settle back into our previous patterns of bigotry and disdain and begin again to attack each other, and we all witnessed the deterioration of that solidarity we experienced . . . for about a month.

Patterns of behavior don’t change much over time, it seems. Malachi, a prophet, one from the community who lays out for his people the future implications of their present actions, had to remind those who were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple that they were once again on a path to breaking the covenant with God. The belief of that time was that God would reward those who were righteous and punish the wicked. But that’s not what they were seeing. Some of the wicked prospered and some of the righteous suffered. So Malachi plants the initial seeds, in Jewish belief, that the promise of the righteous prospering and the wicked suffering would take place in another time, another place. This is the beginning of a belief in an afterlife. And the pattern continued: God makes a covenant with humankind. Humankind breaks their end of the covenant and turns away (God never does). Merciful God reaches out to invite his people back, sending prophets to correct them on their path.

Prophets were not privileged with a supernatural power that gave them vision to see things yet to come. They were simply people with strong convictions and keen psychological and social senses. It isn’t so much that they could predict the future as much as it was about helping others not be victimized by events. The people often didn’t listen or remember what the prophets had said, until after they killed them because they didn’t want to hear.

Along comes Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah. He's right under their noses and yet they don't recognize him. They expected someone else. Nobody said being a prophet would be easy. Just before the scene in today's Gospel, Jesus is sitting in the temple area, near where people would bring their gifts. He sees folks in their finery bring their big, clanky coins, and putting them in the depository with great fanfare. Then he sees a woman, a widow, who has little but gives what she has. It's in this context, while the apostles are dazzled by the enormity and beauty of the temple and all its trappings, that we read today's Gospel.

Now it's good for us to remember that Luke is engaging in some biblical prestidigitation here; some scriptural slight-of-hand, a little magic with words. He writes his gospel to teach people about the importance of the man Jesus, the son of God, someone he has never met, face-to-face. He tells us as much in the introduction to his gospel. His task is to make us believe, as he believes, that Jesus is the unexpected/expected Messiah. To add to Jesus' credibility, Luke fashions this prediction, on the lips of Jesus, about the destruction of the Temple.

This is important. But if we step behind the magician's table, we can see Luke's magic. He's not writing his gospel until 15 years after the Temple was destroyed, and more than 50 years after Jesus lived, suffered, died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. The Church teaches us that all Scripture is inspired by God. So the slight of hand doesn't matter if we focus on the truth of Jesus' divinity that Luke wants us to see, and the message, the path, the way he laid out for his apostles, and for us. No one said the life of an apostle would be easy, and part of the prediction from Jesus is that they would suffer, be persecuted, called to testify, even give their lives. And he echoes Malachi's first reference to the afterlife when he tells them that those who are faithful will not have a hair on their heads harmed. The promise of their prosperity is in the kingdom, in the next life, in what we call heaven.

The word "apostle" actually has history before we find it in scripture. The Romans employed people in the role of apostle to go from Rome to newly conquered territories, in order to enculturate those peoples into the Roman way. Roman Apostles were culture-warriors, sent in after the military might subdued a nation. They were to assimilate conquered people. In a **Star Trek: the Next Generation** thinking, they were like the Borg, a race of part humanoid part robot beings whose task was to overthrow, overtake, and assimilate all beings of all worlds, threatening the very existence of the Federation. They were relentless. "You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile." The Borg would not give you a choice, much like the Romans.

The apostles of Jesus, and I believe the gospel-writers carefully chose this term, were, in effect, culture warriors. But their task was not so much forced assimilation as it was compelling invitation. Their task, our task is this: we're being asked to get involved in God's agenda shown to us by Jesus. God's agenda can arouse intense opposition, as we see even in our world today. We come here to these two tables to be fed in word and sacrament, and then be sent into our beautiful yet flawed world. We are commanded to Go in peace, proclaiming the gospel with our lives, to love and serve the

Lord and one another. Jesus made a vigorous, intimate sense of solidarity among his followers precisely by making our relating to each other a condition for relating to him. There is no relationship with God outside the relationship with our brothers and sisters, with each other, but most especially to areas of our world, our human condition where many of us fear to tread or prefer not to fix our gaze: the stranger, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless, the sick, the underemployed, the prisoners . . . all who are marginalized in our society because of how they look, who they love, where they're from, what they believe. Many are scandalized by this preferential option for the poor and the underdog. Many even ask, "Can he be serious?" Would he ask us to do anything he didn't already do? So the question before us this next-to-last Sunday of the year is this: Will we be an example for those who experience injustice, oppression, fear, or doubt?