

26 Pentecost, Proper 28, Yr. C  
November 13, 2016  
Malachi 4:1-2a; Luke 21:5-19

When I got home on the Thursday before the election, there was a telephone message from The Daily News/Radio Station asking me to call them because they wanted my opinion on how the country would navigate the post-election dynamic. No matter who won, it had been a bitter campaign and how would Americans knit the social fabric back together? And, the caller wanted to know, what did Scripture have to say about this? I must confess that my first impulse was to pretend I hadn't received the call. But then, my conscience got the better of me and I sat down to come up with a thoughtful answer and called him back – all the while being thankful that I hadn't been home when he called in which case I would have had to answer "off the cuff" with no time to think about it! So, here's what I came up with:

Starting in Genesis, God says that each human being is made in God's image and is, therefore, deserving of respect. Moving to the teachings of Jesus, when he was asked to give a summary of the law and the prophets, you'll remember that he quoted the love commandments: Love the Lord your God with your whole heart and mind AND love your neighbor as yourself. And then there's the Lord's Prayer and most of the NT which is about the coming of the Kingdom of God – that situation in which God's will is being done. Next Sunday is Christ the King Sunday when we celebrate that coming reign of God. And what we know of God's will and of that coming Kingdom is that every person will be saved, redeemed, loved. That's what we're to be aiming for now by living it out as best we can. And, finally, although it's not directly Scriptural, but is certainly in the spirit of both the OT and the NT, I mentioned the Golden Rule and that some variation of that rule is to be found in most of the major religions. And, as I said that I was reminded of one of the shipboard conversations I had with the Canadian I mentioned in an earlier sermon in which he said something to the effect that if we just followed that, we'd be OK. I had to agree.

And then came the election with its surprising results. At a meeting earlier in the week, the bishop said something to the effect that no matter who won the election, half of the population would think that world had come to an end. In this case, given the actual vote, 52% of the electorate probably feels that way. Then, the night after the election, some of us gathered for soup and a movie. There were many scenes of beauty in that movie, but also many scenes of suffering and then, also, many scenes of the remains of crumbling empires: the Greeks, the Romans, the Assyrians. And all of that fits right in with this morning's gospel in which Jesus tells his listeners, who had been admiring the beauty and magnificence of the temple, that the day would come when it would be completely destroyed – not one stone would be left upon another. I think it's hard for us to understand how devastating that would be – the temple was the center of Jewish life – its religion, its identity, its economic life, the place where God was, the place where heaven touched earth – all of it. Even worse, Jewish historians say that the temple was brought down from WITHIN – from a clash of cultures, competing with and demonizing one another. From factionalism with its accompanying anger and hatred. There's certainly a lesson here for us.

It's worth noting that one consistent theme running through today's scriptures and relevant to us as Christians today, is the theme of righteousness – we heard it in Malachi and in the psalm. I know we've talked about this before and that we sometimes get confused with that word "righteousness" because we immediately go to SELF-righteousness – a completely different concept, which means smugness, boasting, a kind of false confidence. Righteousness as it's used in the Scriptures has to do with relationship – and the righteous person was the one who fulfilled the demands in any given relationship. It's tied up with the idea of the covenant community – that God has chosen this community to be in relationship with him. Remember God saying: You will be my people and I will be your God. God's desire was the formation of an ideal, equitable community in which peace and prosperity would be possible because everyone was in right relationship – first of all with God and then with one another. So, the righteous person was the one who preserved the peace and wholeness of the community. The covenant community was to be one in which each person was heard, respected and cared for. Special attention was to be given to the voiceless and powerless – the widow, orphans, poor and aliens. There was to be resistance to any kind of exclusion from community participation. This idea doesn't go away with Jesus. In fact, it's at the heart of his Kingdom message. Just before the conversation we heard this morning about the Temple, Jesus had cleaned the money lenders of the temple, quoting Jeremiah and the spirit of Jeremiah when he says "do no wrong or violence to the alien of the orphan ...or widow. If you do not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation."

Does this speak to the election results? Some have argued that at least one segment of Trump voters felt disenfranchised, or held in contempt, or simply ignored, and that their vote was not only one of protest, but also one that hoped for change. Even some of those supporters, however, are unsure what we're in for – one of them was quoted as saying, "We'll give him 18 months" and then if he doesn't deliver, was the implication, we'll vote him out. But there are a couple of things worth noting. At least some of those supporters have adopted those same attitudes they complained about: being ignored, being held in contempt, being held down – and transferred them to others – often other races. The other concern, voiced by some commentators is that the rhetoric and promises of the campaign raise expectations that can't be fulfilled. So, what will happen to all that anger when no new steel mills come to Ohio and trade wars lead to increased prices for the American consumer? And there is evidence of contradictory desires: I want small government, but not so small that it can't deliver what I want. And, even more unattractive, some studies have shown that people will give up benefits that they need and want if people from another race will also benefit. It's clear that there are grievances and some of them are legitimate and need to be addressed. The hope is that they will be and that they will be addressed in a way that doesn't further fracture the country but that begins to knit it back together.

In that regard, I got a lot of e-mails over the past few days, as I'm sure many of you did. One of them was from the Dean of St. James Cathedral in Chicago. He's a Brit and was in England when he heard the news. His hope was that Trump would lead with the sentiments expressed in his victory speech in which he talked about a harmonious and united country, rather than the kind of divisive, ugly rhetoric of the 17 months of the campaign. Several correspondents, including our bishop, called for us to find common ground and to listen to one another in an

attempt to understand where people are coming from and to find a way forward. Another talked about the fact that we all want the same thing – we all want meaningful and well-paid work, less wealth disparity, safe places to raise our kids, politics that are beyond corruption and security.

Many correspondents reminded us that we need to pray – for the success of the Trump presidency, that he may govern wisely and justly and for healing for the nation, the world and for each of us with the recognition that we all need grace, compassion and understanding. The scriptures also remind us about righteousness; that we have a duty to the poor and vulnerable among us as well as a duty to work for peace and reconciliation. The institutions that protect our common life together are fragile. I read one article in which an immigrant from Africa said that Americans treated their democratic institutions like footballs – to be kicked around and abused without thought of consequences. But, she said, they are really more like Fabergé eggs, precious and breakable. It reminded me of that quote from Benjamin Franklin after the republic was established. “Well, now you have your Republic,” he said. “Let’s see if you can keep it.” Actions have consequences, votes have consequences, failing to vote has consequences and how we treat and speak about one another has consequences. Perhaps someday someone will be looking at the ruin of our democracy but my prayer is that in the meantime we will realize what a gift we’ve been given and use it wisely, making it into the kind of covenant community God envisioned. In the long run, of course, as the gospel reminds us, all human institutions will pass away and God’s kingdom will be the only reality. In the meantime, our role is, I think, a dual one. First to work for that covenant community. But, secondly, to live in hope and trust – trust that God’s work is more about consummation and completion and fulfillment, rather than disintegration and destruction. Trust that our future belongs to God and is, therefore, held in love. Amen.