

The Day of the Lord

The last chapter of the Old Testament, our First Reading for today, Malachi 4:1-6, talks about the “coming” day. It is a day of wild extremes. The wicked are like chaff, swept away in engulfing flames. When the fire is past, nothing remains but ashes, their place knows them no more. *“It will not leave them either a root or a branch.”* On the other hand, *Nevertheless, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in His wings.* The believers have been looking. There has long been a glow in the sky. They know the sun is coming. Those in darkness have seen a great light. Now it peeps above the horizon and leaps into the sky in all its splendour. It brings healing too. We bask our cold stiff joints and limbs - and hearts - in its glow. It heals and restores. It brings life eternal life!

Besides this wonderful, warming Sun (and we could also spell that S-o-n if we wanted to) there is the picture of bull-calves released from their stalls after being penned up all winter. They feel good. They want to run and jump for the sheer joy of it. That’s the way it is with Christ’s people, who understand and appreciate that Christ has set them free.

No sick calf feels like jumping. The sickness of sin is past! Our spirits feel good! They want to kick and frolic in God’s sunshine forever - and they shall! Nothing can hold them back. Imagine racing up the slopes of light! The saints stream into their final pasture. The Good Shepherd has kept His word. All is well and good.

God’s good name is involved here as well. And this too is pastoral, coming from the Good Shepherd chapter of the Bible (John 10). There Jesus says, *“I know My sheep and My sheep know Me. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd.”* (verses 14, 16). We know God’s name, and Philippians 2:10 says, *“At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

Malachi mentions the law in verse 4. He says, *“Remember the Law of My servant Moses, the Prescriptions and the Decisions that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel!”* This is the word ‘torah.’ It comes from the verb meaning “to teach” or “to instruct.” Here it does not mean just the laws with dos and do nots but also, and especially, the words of promise and instruction, the complete revelation of God to His people. We are saved through this revelation of God’s will, this instruction. It was something good. *“Do this and you will live,”* Jesus once said, (Luke 10:28). This was the manual for life, the manual to life. We are saved by the Word and through the Word. Here at the end of the Old Testament, God’s people were asked to remember. Remember the rules. Remember the umpire’s decision, the blueprints for life.

What a treasure we have in our hands! We can search through the will of God as a lawyer ruffles through a dossier or a student looks through a notebook. God gave His people His plan for life. How happy the devil is when they neglect it. How sad he is when God’s people make faithful use of it. How close we all are to the Last Day and to judgment.

The prophet Elijah was promised to the Old Testament people. Jesus commented on this in Matthew 17:11-13: *“To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.”* And what Luke wrote in chapter 1:17 draws us even closer to these last words of Malachi: *“He [John] will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”* These are the very words Malachi wrote in verse 6.

The Word speaks in other places about how, as the world nears its end, children will turn against their parents and parents will turn against their children. Our world is full of examples that this happens and is happening. Parents commit the ultimate in child abuse - they neglect their children’s souls. They don’t care where their children will spend eternity. They spend money for their children’s bodies and for their education, but they neglect to tell the children the commands and laws of God, to talk about them on the way, to write them in their homes and on their hearts.

But there is also the fact that as the day grows closer and closer, fathers and children will be talking to each other and turning to each other. There will be good families. God will see to it! In our day when we sometimes feel like despairing because there are no good families left, there are good families. Families do pray together and do stay together through life. This is the greatest turning together of hearts, fathers talking to their children about the Saviour, children talking to their fathers. Their hearts are touched through the only thing that touches hearts, the Word of God.

Here, at the very end of the Old Testament, there is a reference to Christian education. It is not only education of a formal nature in classrooms but the education that comes from hearts that really and truly care for each other. Education - heart to heart! From fathers to their children!

If it is not this, then comes *destruction*. The Old Testament ends with this word. This did not seem to be a good way to end the Old Testament and to leave the people hanging for the next four hundred years before the Babe of Bethlehem arrived in swaddling clothes.

It is a sombre way to end, but Malachi's words are meant to draw us up short. They were spoken in the spirit of the prophets, of whom Malachi was the last. Judgment is coming, but with this "*great and dreadful day of the LORD*" there is also hope and coming salvation. We wait for it. We peer into the future as Malachi and his people did, hands shading our eyes as we scan the horizon. We are millennia closer to that day!

Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus!