

Finding our Bearings in a Distorted World



See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who reverence my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. Malachi 4.1-2

The Bible readings for the Sundays just before the start of Advent become increasingly shrill, as the prophets describe an increase in complacency and corruption as the world disregards the call upon it of God. They speak of a moral lethargy in the face of which charlatans of different kinds take advantage of the listlessness of the culture; and it seems as if the stable foundations of the kingdom of God have been lost, possibly for ever.

The prophets issue a *warning* – but not to make us *fearful*. The Prophet Malachi, for example, sees the day of reckoning as a crisis not for *us*, but for the *arrogant* and for *evildoers*. Those who stay true to the prompting of ‘righteousness’ will ‘go out leaping like calves from the stall’! The *righteous*, who abide by the precepts of the *Sermon on the Mount*, for example – like the *Beatitudes* commended to us on All Saints Day – will be *vindicated*. “Those who endure to the end will be saved” (cf Matthew 24.13). *Resilience* and *stamina* mark out those who are genuinely stable and wise.

Alongside *knowing where our foundations are and remaining grounded in what is dependable and true*, this week’s Gospel also speaks of a world in which a multitude of pushy voices try to impose their own interpretations on the ‘signs of the times’, sometimes by distraction, sometimes by sheer force of volume, sometimes by intentional fear-mongering. What Jesus describes is like the manipulative gabbling of so many of the voices in our own day and age – with their alternative facts and misleading soundbites, their subversion of consensus or of the possibility even of our listening to each other properly, let alone with kindness and mutual grace. Some of them will adopt slogans and campaigns which claim to be godly and true; but we should be wary, says Jesus: ‘*Beware that you are not led astray;*

for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not go after them. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do

not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.’ Then he said to them, ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.’

Luke 21.8-19

How should we respond to all this noise and anger and disputation and mutual antagonism and disregard for recognised common ground? ‘By your *endurance* you will gain your souls.’ We are not asked to change the terms of the debate, as if it were as simple as that; but, instead, to see beyond it – to see the wider perspective, grounded in values which are dependable and sure, the precepts of the *kingdom of God*, and right at their heart, a ‘*wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict*’. It is our calling to be the *grown-ups in the room*.

This is why the Scriptural tradition places so much emphasis on *wisdom* and *discernment*, on maturity and sure-heartedness, on deep stability of soul, fully grounded in the Word of God; unfazed, and not easily swayed:

*Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in due season,
and their leaves do not wither.*

Psalms 1.1-3

May we be like that, ever stable and wise, in a world of lies and deceit.