

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
Malachi 1:14B-2:2B, 8-10
Psalm 131:1, 2, 3
1 Thessalonians 2:7B-9, 13
Matthew 23:1-12
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Our Old Testament reading from the Book of Malachi, condemns the misconduct of priests. It seems they have been accepting sick, lame, animals for use in ritual sacrifices in place of the healthy animals mandated by law. Now people are complaining that their ritual sacrifices aren't working. They are having no benefit. The prophet is arguing, in effect, "Well, what do you expect? Your sacrifices are a deliberate insult to God. You think it doesn't matter? Go down to the palace and try offering one of those inadequate animals as a gift to the governor and see what happens." We might ask ourselves why priests would behave in this way. Perhaps, like the unjust steward, they are currying favor by their shady practices – trying to obtain some worldly advantage.

500 years later, in our Gospel, Jesus is criticizing the religious leaders of his own time. He advises the people that they should, by all means, do whatever the scribes and Pharisees instruct them to do, but they should not follow the example of their *lives*, which are spent in the pursuit of status and prestige. They love places of honor at banquets and places of honor at synagogues and so on. The gist of our Lord's message is summed up in the conclusion of the passage: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

The ideal attitude is laid out for us in the psalm: "OH LORD, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes haughty; I busy not myself with great things, nor with things too sublime for me. Nay rather, I have stilled and quieted my soul

like a weaned child on its mother's lap, so is my soul within me." It must be significant that the child on its mother's lap is a *weaned* child. A weaned child has experienced disconcerting change in its life. The food it has been accustomed to receive from its mother has been withdrawn, and yet its mother is still there – still loving and protecting – and is now the giver of different food – solid food. So, the weaned child must be anxious at the change, but reassured by the continuing relationship. In some sense, it must be the same for the "stilled and quieted" human soul. Such a soul has been unsettled but, in the Lord's enduring love, has found peace.

Remarkably, much the same imagery that the psalm employs in relation to the individual human soul, is employed by St. Paul in our Second Reading to describe the faith of a Christian community as a whole. In his letter, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that when he was with them, "We were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children. With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well." But now Paul is no longer with them. They have, in essence, been weaned. His letter is an effort to reassure them that their relationship with him and with God, while changed, endures. As they grow and mature in Christ, the word of God continues to "be at work" in them.

Our readings today encourage us, as individuals and as a people, to respond to the anxiety caused by changes in our lives, not by high flown machinations, not by trying to shelter behind status and prestige, but by cultivating a childlike trust in God. For while it is true that Jesus no longer walks among us, as he did in the days of his earthly ministry, he continues to cherish us and to give us his very self as food and drink.