

## Scriptures

### Malachi 4:1-2a

#### **The Day of the Lord Is Coming**

**4** The Lord Almighty says, “The day is coming when all proud and evil people will burn like straw. On that day they will burn up, and there will be nothing left of them. <sup>2</sup> But for you who obey me, my saving power will rise on you like the sun and bring healing like the sun's rays. You will be as free and happy as calves let out of a stall.

### 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

<sup>6</sup> Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. <sup>7</sup> For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. <sup>9</sup> This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. <sup>10</sup> For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. <sup>11</sup> For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. <sup>12</sup> Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. <sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

### Luke 21:5-19

<sup>5</sup> When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, <sup>6</sup> “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

<sup>7</sup> They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” <sup>8</sup> And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’<sup>[a]</sup> and, ‘The time is near!’<sup>[b]</sup> Do not go after them.

<sup>9</sup> “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.” <sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; <sup>11</sup> there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

<sup>12</sup> “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. <sup>13</sup> This will give you an opportunity to testify. <sup>14</sup> So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; <sup>15</sup> for I will give you words<sup>[c]</sup> and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. <sup>16</sup> You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup> You will be hated by all because of my name. <sup>18</sup> But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup> By your endurance you will gain your souls.

### Sermon: Love is never wasted

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Our gospel opens with Jesus and his entourage walking near the temple. Some of them were marvelling at the temple – this temple was one of the wonders of the world. As people came to Jerusalem this temple on the hill rose above everything else and it was a marvel to behold.

This was a new temple – not long ago while we were reading Jeremiah we read about the old temple being destroyed centuries earlier. Nehemiah and his gang rebuilt the temple some years later, but it was a much more modest affair – not nearly what been present before.

After the Romans came, Herod decided to rebuild the temple as a public works project. This is Herod Sr – the Herod that was part of the trial of Jesus was Herod Antipas – the son. Herod Sr had two reasons for building this temple: one – it would solidify his position with the Jews. The Jews were already a difficult people – they were stiff-necked with God, and they were even more so with foreign rulers. Already they demanded special treatment that the other nations conquered by Rome never got – such as getting a pass on Emperor worship.

So a new temple would keep these troublesome people in line, which would make Herod's job that much easier. The second reason for building was that the first temple was one of the wonders of the world – it was magnificent. Herod wanted the fame and adulation that would come from rebuilding such a monument. Neighbouring governors would be envious of this major status symbol.

This temple was amazing – Herod apparently subscribed to my own view that anything worth doing is worth overdoing. The temple was huge, dominating the skyline for miles around. The foundation blocks are massive – thought the temple itself was torn down the foundation blocks can still be seen, and I've seen them. I can't imagine moving those things around – there is a real sense of permanence with these stones. The temple was also quite ornate, and was filled with treasures.

Jesus' companions were marvelling at the temple as they walked by and Jesus, as was his custom, said something that completely blew them away. He said 'the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.' Keep in mind they are looking at an edifice made of stones that are thousands upon thousands of pounds each. Never mind that this structure is meant to be the permanent home of God, just looking at it one can't imagine that it could be moved in any way. And yet Jesus casually drops the bomb that this building will not last.

The disciples can't believe this, they ask how it could happen, when it would happen, and if there would be any signs. This last question reveals some wisdom – they assume that the only one who could destroy God's temple would be God himself, and God always lets his will be known in advance – he always sends signs.

Jesus kind of sidesteps the question though. He starts to talk about what the signs will not be. He says that there will be wars, there will be insurrections, but don't worry, this is not the end.' '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.'

This is disastrous news to the disciples, but Jesus seems to be just getting warmed up. He continues: '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 is even more terrifying – the wars and earthquakes are disasters, but they are impersonal. They just happen and they happen to everyone together.

But here Jesus is talking about persecution of the disciples themselves – he warns that people will be persecuted because of the name of Jesus – surely the ones persecuted because of the name of Jesus would have to be his closest allies – his followers – his disciples. Things are about to get very, very real for these followers.

And they aren't just going to be persecuted by Romans – they will be handed over to synagogues and prisons – synagogues are the Jewish meeting places, they are going to be persecuted by their own people. This really is bad news Jesus is piling on them – it couldn't really get any worse.

Jesus makes plain here that the people of God will be misled, that they will suffer in war and natural disaster, that injustice and persecution will visit them, and that betrayal and death will not be unknown. Luke wrote his gospel somewhere between 85 and 90 a.d. For the early church who are reading his words, Jerusalem and the temple have already been destroyed. Vesuvius has erupted and buried Pompeii, wars and massacres have multiplied, persecution is a present enemy – people are running scared. The world is falling apart. The early church read these words of Jesus with great interest – he was describing their world to a T.

Let's come to today. As the disciples admired the man-made temple and couldn't conceive of anything ever happening to it, we also are filled with pride as we regard what we have built. We fool ourselves into thinking that the works of our hands is somehow permanent – even eternal. We think we know things.

Well, just like with the disciples it turns out we aren't such good predictors of the future after all, the status quo is far from permanent. Trump will never get elected, crowed the newspapers for months. Not a chance, said the tv commentators. It can't possibly happen, social media claimed.

And then the unthinkable did happen. And to many people, this feels like the end of the world – the end of everything. A stepping back 50 years in human rights.

In the same way that the disciples were left scared and full of doubt after Jesus' revelation about their future, so too millions of Americans are now living in fear. Is it time to start rounding up Muslims? Are mass deportations about to begin for illegals from central and south America? Is there a wall going up? Are women all now to expect groping and objectification?

I don't know what the future holds for our neighbours down south – I strongly suspect that most of the rhetoric spouted before the election will never come to pass. We expect and even assume that 90% of the promises made during an election will be broken, there's no reason to think any differently this time around, although it is the inability of people to imagine the inconceivable that led to this result in the first place.

The point is – something that nobody thought was possible has happened, and now many feel as though the world is ending. The temple has fallen, the earth has shaken, and many Americans now live under the threat of war, famine, and persecution.

So now what? What is the Christian path forward? There are two viewpoints to avoid. One is to think that the world is so messed up that it is beyond any point of redemption or possibility of being changed for the better; the second is to think that things are not really so bad after all and so not all that much really needs to be done.

The second view, that we don't have to do much of anything, can be quite easily and simply refuted. We live in a fallen world. We are not living the way God intends for us to live. There is always something that needs to be done because there are always people suffering and being oppressed. This is true no matter who wins any election. Doing nothing is not the Christian way, it never has been the Christian way. It is not the way that Jesus modelled for us.

But what of the other extreme? There are people who feel so discouraged, so overwhelmed by the forces of the world arrayed against them that there is no fight left in them. We often feel this feeling – what possible

difference can I make? What can one woman or one man do? Well, the answer is everything. We can do everything.

We know this because we know the plan and will of God. The day is coming, says the Lord, when all proud and evil people will burn like straw. On that day they will burn up, and there will be nothing left of them. But for you who obey me, my saving power will rise on you like the sun and bring healing like the sun's rays. You will be as free and happy as calves let out of a stall.

God's plan is to heal our world, to make us whole. The God of Abraham is the God of justice. God doesn't intend to let oppression have the last word. The words of God in Malachi assure us that there will come a day when evil will simply not be able to prosper, or even exist. The sun will rise on a new day, a new kingdom. This means that working today for the cause of justice is not in vain, it is not a wasted effort. Our actions place us in the vanguard of God's inbreaking kingdom; we become agents and ambassadors of God in enemy territory.

Jesus spoke of this when he said the coming tribulation will give us an opportunity to testify. Our actions under pressure speak volumes to those watching and listening. Jesus told his disciples not to worry or to prepare for being arrested. 'Don't plan your defence ahead of time,' he said, 'I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.' Jesus promised to have our backs.

The direction is clear, though the specific steps may not be. We are not to disregard the suffering and oppression of others and be complacent in this world, nor are we to be overwhelmed and incapacitated by the volume of work to be done. As Christians our job is to act. We are to be proactive and intentional, never afraid, while still remaining humble. We are called to work – the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

Our reading from Thessalonians is all about work. Paul writes of his time among the Thessalonians and states that 'we were not idle when we were with you; we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it.' Even though as a visiting preacher Paul and his entourage would have been entitled to be supported by the community during his visit, he made a point of paying his own way. Often we focus on this and conclude that the main message of this passage is that 'those unwilling to work should not eat,' and usually this is used in a way to help us feel better about ignoring those around us in need. To make things easier on ourselves we purposefully muddy the distinction between being unwilling to work and being unable to find work so we can exclude even more people from being our neighbours, but that's another sermon.

What is often overlooked is that the passage is not only about not working, it's also about doing the wrong kind of work to the wrong ends. In verses six and eleven Paul speaks, literally, of 'walking idly' which is a somewhat contradictory image. True idleness would involve more lounging than walking. What we begin to see is that the passage is, then, not just about people who are unwilling or unable to work; instead this is speaking to those who are working at being busybodies rather than truly being productive and supportive of others.

We are created by God in order that we might take part in *good* deeds. Being busy is not in itself useful; our activity has to be directed toward God and in line with God's purposes. It's not just work we're after, but good work – God's work.

So as we come back to the election results, the unthinkable destruction of the modern temple of liberal social justice and human rights, we have to ask 'what are the good works that we should be doing?' The last

couple of days there has been a thing going around on Facebook that promotes wearing a safety pin. This safety pin is supposed to signify that the one wearing it is a safe person to be around – one who does not hold racist, sexist or other kinds of exclusionary views. Kind of like a mobile block parent.

Unfortunately, this safety pin campaign does not qualify as good works. It may be a *feel* good work, in that the person wearing the pin may feel good about themselves. Essentially this safety pin wearing is virtue signalling – it's trying to show others how virtuous we think we are. It's akin to people putting a flag on their facebook profile picture after a terrorist attack – it makes people feel good, but it has no real meaning – it doesn't change the situation on the ground in the slightest.

Solidarity and support does not come from a facebook post, nor from wearing a safety pin, nor from putting a ribbon on our cars. We do these things for ourselves to promote our own self-image; we don't do this for others. Awareness of problems *is* the first step to fixing them, but somewhere along the line our society has gotten stuck and we seem to think that awareness is it – that's where it ends.

Awareness didn't help the man left for dead at the side of the road – the Good Samaritan didn't change his facebook status, or stand in the middle of the road as people passed by saying 'look – are you aware of him?' Of course not – the reason we talk about this unnamed Samaritan in Jesus' parable is because he actually did something.

He took the time to help this man, he bound his wounds, gave up his donkey for the man to ride, paid for him to have a roof over his head while he recovered. Awareness should prompt us to action. So, wear a safety pin, if you like, but don't let that be all you do. It is not a substitute for doing something substantial, something real.

You may ask then, what is it that we are to do? What is the action that arises out of our awareness? I can't tell you. Just as Jesus told his disciples not to plan out what they would do or say in the face of persecution and oppression, so too I can't tell you what you need to do other than to say 'listen.'

Jesus promised that when it is needed he will give us words and wisdom. He will direct our steps. The Samaritan man would have had no idea that he'd be patching up some Jew on the road that day – we also don't know what circumstances we will face as we go through life. Our preparation does not come in the form of a plan or a tactic, it is not in our control. Instead, our preparation comes in the form of relationship.

If we have a relationship with Jesus, then we will recognize his voice. If we recognize his voice then we will always know what to do. When the time comes – you will know. And when you know, and act upon this knowledge, this awareness, when you endure, and remain faithful in the face of suffering and continue your commitment especially in a world of violence, betrayal and injustice, then we come to Jesus' closing promise in this morning's reading. 'In your endurance, you will possess your lives.'