

Just How Is Your Vision?

Lord may the meditations of my heart and the words of my lips be acceptable in your sight.

I was surprised one day during my school years by the change in my eyesight. I had taken a table at the back of the room and found out that I could not read some of the instructions on the chalkboard. After obtaining new glasses, I was equally surprised by the beautiful fall vision of the many changing colors of the trees in the mountains surrounding my hometown.

Our scripture readings today from Malachi and Luke clue us into of the importance of vision - not just earthly temporal vision but spiritual eternal vision.

The book of Malachi, in which we get a taste of in our first reading today, begins with God's words. "I have loved you, but my people say, "How have you loved us?" The prophet is offering God's love to a disheartened people. He is rebuking corruption, calling God's people to more sincere worship and challenging them to live up to their eternal covenant with God.

In specific terms, the prophet reminded the people of the great gift of a covenantal relationship with God given at the time of Jacob. They were destroying that relationship by their actions of self-interest. Malachi exact indictment was that the people were giving sub-standard offerings to the temple, and the priests were using them as sacrifices to the Lord. The offerings included animals that were lame, sick, or blind rather than the best of the flock.

In today's First Reading from Malachi 4, we hear the Lord proclaiming judgement and offering hope. The words of judgement seem harsh to us. However, the speaker faced a people given to religious cynicism and spiritual disillusionment. The people were being called to see that an eternal vision based on a spiritual relationship with God was more important than a temporal vision based on earthly concepts.

As seen in many of the prophetic books, Malachi also offered hope. Depending on the commentary, the words "sun of righteousness" are believed to be a title for the Messiah or a figurative description of a new era of righteousness in which God would overturn the curse of evil.

Spiritual restoration, or healing, would be based on God's cleansing the people and forgiving their sins which would result from the people's reconciliation with God and, therefore, renewing their covenant relationship.

Some commentaries suggest that the beautiful words, "healing in its wings" may be a symbol of God's protection and rescue of his people. Scripture scholar, Julia O'Brien, in her commentary, suggests that there are contrasting images of heat given in this passage. She indicates that the author of Malachi is proclaiming that while the wicked will burn as in a hot oven, those who respect God will experience the healing warmth of the sun.

As we move on to today's gospel, we are left with the question, "Did Malachi's message sway God's people to improve their vision?"

As opposed to the poor temple sacrifices given during the time of Malachi, in the scripture passage that is located right before today's gospel reading from Luke, we encounter a pure sacrifice. It is the story of a poor widow giving money in the temple. In this story, the widow who gave all she had was offering a sacrifice birthed out of her relationship with God.

In her book, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus*, Catherine Wright notes: "The size of the widow's gift would not have been large enough to even place in one of the thirteen temple-shaped offering containers. Instead, the widow would have had to place her meager funds in another chest intended for "voluntary" giving.

This scripture scholar suggests these containers emphasize the *true quality* of the widow's gift. The best gift to God came in the small chest not the big container. In human eyes, this offering would have seemed small and nonsensical but in the Lord's eyes the offering was *tremendous* for she gave God everything based on her eternal vision.

In today's gospel reading, we hear about a temporal vision of splendor. Some people were speaking about the temple proclaiming how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.

This opulence was confirmed by a historian of that period, named Josephus. He wrote, "To approaching strangers the temple appeared from afar like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white. Some of the stones in the structure were forty-five cubits in length, five in height, and six in breadth."

Yet, Jesus turns this temporal vision to an eternal one. He predicts the future destruction of the temple and makes it clear that wars and persecution in our world are both inevitable and unpredictable. Jesus proclaims that we should not focus on temporal changes in the world to the *exclusion* of our eternal relationship with God. He reassures his listeners that during hard times they can count on the presence of the Lord.

So, is our vision temporal or eternal?

The Advent season will be upon us in a few weeks and is a perfect time to check out our sight. For, in Advent, we look beyond the flickering flame of the temporal world to the radiant flame of the light of love in the eternal one.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, a founder of the contemplative monastic order of the Cistercians, spoke of an *Inner Advent*. He believed this event consisted of Christ coming continually into our hearts.

Thomas Merton, a Cistercian Monk, elaborated on Bernard's words by proclaiming, "*This coming of Christ in our hearts is the event that calls us to respond, to be transformed, and it is an event that in turn transforms us.*"

I believe that Advent is a perfect time to review and renew our eternal relationship with the Lord. During that time, we might ask ourselves the following questions:

Do we need to consider new spiritual practices to deepen our love relationship with the Lord?

Do we need to renew our personal commitment to the Lord by continuing to give our best in prayer and action?

Lord, may we always strive to see our world with an eternal vision that calls us to live our life in tune with you. Amen.

I pray this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen