

The Gift of the Priesthood

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time

November 5th 2023

Today I want to talk about the gift of the priesthood because this is the theme at the heart of today's readings. This is a photo of the priests of Calgary at our Study Days in Canmore at the beginning of October.

But before we get to the good news about the priesthood we need to acknowledge the bad news because it is in the readings and we know about it through recent history.

In the first reading from Malachi, which was the last of the Old Testament Prophets, was written about 400 years before Jesus. There are ringing words of indictment directed toward corrupt priests. Of them the Malachi says:

You have turned many away by your instruction, you have corrupted the covenant of Levi.

What does this mean? All of the priests were from the Tribe of Levi and there was a special commitment they were to make to the Lord and the Lord's people. This promise and covenant of Levi is found in Exodus. There we read the priesthood was to be a total service to God. The holy garments the priest wore were to represent their holy way of life. Malachi expresses this truth in a verse we did not read today:

For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts⁷

Oh by the way, the name Malachi means "messenger". The message he needed to deliver was that the covenant of Levi had become corrupted. Knowledge was not guarded. What had happened to these priests is they had become proud and felt special privileges owed to them. The same thing is expressed by Jesus in today's Gospel. While the scribes and Pharisees were to be respected for their teaching – they taught the "Law of Moses"; Jesus warned that they were not practising what they preached. They had become prideful and lacked humility. They were like those mentioned in Malachi.

They considered themselves the religious and intellectual elite of the time. Little by little, this class of elite spiritual leaders had become corrupt and arrogant. They forgot that they were supposed to be servants of God and God's people. They started treating the people of God as their servants instead.

Young men would attach themselves to a famous Pharisee, and they would call him their "father," in the spiritual sense. They would also use other terms of respect, like teacher and master. But they wouldn't call any other Pharisee "father." The focus had mistakenly shifted to the individual Pharisee's greatness, away from the service he was supposed to be giving in God's name to God's people.

So when Jesus warns his own followers to avoid this practice, he is warning them against the danger of treating religious leaders like gurus, like substitutes for God. This helps us to then understand what Jesus is teaching in this passage.

Which brings us to the Good News.

When Jesus says “do not call anyone Father” he means in this sense. When we address a priest as “Father” it is not in the exclusive and selective sense practised in first century Judaism, but rather in the sense that all priests are called to reflect the true and loving Fatherhood of God. This is because their ordination is a way for the eternal and invisible fatherhood of God to be made visible.

This is made clear in both the Old Testament and Gospel readings. Listen again to how the reading from Malachi ended:

Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning of covenant of our ancestors.

From the Gospel we read:

And call no on your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven

God is our universal Father and so any representation of his loving presence on earth is to be in a way that truly reflects his covenant of holy love. This is exactly what priests by their vocation are called to do. Malachi has this clear teaching on how priests are to be true messengers of God

My covenant with Levi was a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. ⁶ True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity¹

This is what true and spiritual fatherhood looks like. This is the gift of the priesthood.

We have to consciously remind ourselves that the spiritual fatherhood of a priest is real, and it is from God, and it makes a difference in our lives and in the world.

St Paul captured the heart of the priesthood in the reading we had today from Thessalonians. He said of himself:

We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because of have become so dear to us.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Mal 2:5–6). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

This is the gift of the priesthood. Listen to the words he uses:

- Tenderly caring
- Deeply care for you
- Determined to share with you not only the Gospel but our own selves.
- You have become so dear to us

What kind of influence did St Paul's pastoral care have on the Thessalonians?

We constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you heard the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not has a human word, but as what it really is, the Word of God which is at work in you believers.

The Thessalonians were open to being transformed by the preaching of the Apostle Paul because his life matched his words. There was an integrity to his message because it was congruent with how he lived.

This is the gift of the priesthood. True instruction joined to a Christ- shaped life can bring people to a deepening relationship with Jesus as happened at Thessalonica.

I want to conclude by asking any young boy, a teenager or young man: Have you ever considered a vocation to the priesthood? Although it is a life of sacrifice it is also a great gift to love and serve Jesus and his Church in this way. If the priesthood is something that interests you, I would be pleased to discuss this with you. The Diocese is creatively fostering ways for young men to discern a calling.

This is Fr Santiago Torres who was ordained a priest in June 2023. He with other young priests in our Diocese are embodying how a holy, loving and wise priest can bless the Church. May we give thanks for priests we know and pray for the next generation of men who will answer the Lord's called and be his messengers, (Malachi's) in their generation.