

2nd before Advent, Proper 28
18 November 2007

Malachi 4:1-2a
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

A fantasia on red

- Red: the liturgical colour of today, part of the season of the Kingdom of God: red for royal.
- Red: Krasnaya, beautiful, Russian, communism. Red for beautiful.
- Red for poppy: beautiful poppies that signify carnage – why because of plant dormancy. New life from destruction. Red for remembrance.
- But poppies produce morphine which sends us to sleep: are we asleep to today when we can't let go of the past? And morphine is addictive. Red for dangerous.
- Red for blood: martyrdom, destruction. But blood fights disease, blood removes rubbish, blood brings oxygen. Red for paradox, contradiction.

Last week we brought together some of those themes in Remembrance ceremonies: blood red poppies signifying that redemption can come through battle, through destruction, through warfare, through the shedding of blood.

Battling against evil is part of our faith. It's a battle that rages inside each of us. Warfare is right in the middle of today's liturgy: Holy Holy Holy Lord God of hosts (or God of power and might in lamentable CW) – sabaOTH – saba armies, armies of heaven, armies against evil. Holy destruction, as in Malachi's prophecy. And that is how today's gospel can be read: Jesus talking starkly of destruction, the destroyer of old ways, all that the Jews held dear, removing the rubbish of the Temple, and bringing the oxygen of new life. Yes, new life can come from battle, from destruction. Remember the poppies: red not white.

Destruction of the temple is about destroying the old ways that bind us. Hanging on to old ways, old attitudes, is a form of idolatry. Think how much depression and mental illness is caused by being stuck in the past, unable to live in the present, tethered by attitudes, shoulds, oughts. They are addictions, quite as much as those that come from dependence on the juice of the poppy.

It's painful to get rid of all that we hold dear: opinions, the latest gadget, fashion, a lovely house, societies we belong to, appearance, books, guilt – not letting go but a clean out, when once we get going, is cleansing, liberating, freeing, salving.

We're promised in the beatitudes that we're most blessed when we have nothing. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you: only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

Salvation, liberation, redemption comes when we give up ties that bind, that keep us tethered to possessions, to unnecessary ways of doing things. When we've lost these addictions, this closed-mindedness, these attachments, we're freed up inside, free to seek the Kingdom, which the Gospels tell us is the most important thing. Seek ye first ... Don't worry about missing out on material goods – another hard message when we are confronted every minute by that all pervading evil, the advertising industry.

Red for Kingdom, Red for the Kingdom of God in our blood, in our veins if we could but recognize it. The kingdom not of the reasonable God of wishy-washy liberals, or the vengeful God of intolerant fundamentalists, but the Kingdom of the unknowable God who laid the foundation of the earth and who can not be squeezed into the limits of human thinking. There's a wideness in God's mercy The unknowable, immortal, invisible, inaccessible, God of divine wisdom, not human wisdom.

Divine wisdom, present alongside God at the moment of creation, the stardust out of which the cosmos is made, all around us, in the air we breathe, personified in Christ, the always challenging, always unpredictable Jesus who said in today's gospel "I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ... By your endurance you will gain your souls."

We can't explain the wisdom or the ways of God; we simply keep going, push on in faith as Paul urged the Thessalonians to do.

Red for the church militant, not the church hesitant or the church petulant, but the church militant. Onward Christian Soldiers.

Red for salvation. Red for glory.