

Every year at this time, during the short dark grey days of late fall, or this year early winter, the Scripture readings lead us to a reflection of the final judgement and the end of days. Our Gospel today reflects on the end times and we have Jesus peering into the future and showing what awaits his disciples. And it is pretty bleak. False teachers, wars, persecutions, prison, betrayal by family and friends, being hated by all. The first reading from the prophet Malachi, speaks of fire, the day is coming when all evil doers will be like stubble that will be burned.

But how do we interpret them? Do we wait in fear for the tribulation that is to come? Do we envision the day when all the evil doers will get what is coming to them, divine punishment for all the bad guys. Is the message, be afraid, be very afraid for the end is near?

Turning to the first reading we hear the prophet Malachi describe the coming of the Lord as the day in which evil doers will be burned up. "See the day is coming burning like an oven." The image of a flame, the symbol of fire is one which is common in our religious imagery. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended as tongues of fire. The mystics describe God's love as a flame of fire.

At one level fire is a very comforting thing. It provides warmth, light, security and peace. The experience of God's love is like curling up before the fire place with a hot cup of cocoa. But fire is also destructive, it burns; it purifies; it consumes. And as we draw ever closer to the flame it will eventually overtake us and we will become one with the flame. The saints of the Church have always taught that it's not good enough to simply sit basking in the love of God snuggled up with our cup of hot chocolate. The goal is to become one with the flame, a process which involves pain; a process which we will resist, a process which involves the letting go of our own will in order to accept the will of God.

Beatrice Bruteau in her book, Living with Contradiction speaks about God's love which may help understand the nature of this process. She says the "The way to find fulfillment is not to escape from pain by refusing to love (which is despair) or to love and possess what we love (which is self-centeredness) but to love passionately with mind, heart and soul and to endure the pain of letting go. Since I know what a hard thing is being asked of me I am tempted to think that only a hard and cruel God could ask it. But then I reflect how much it tells me about love. **The fact that I am held in such a love; that I am free to accept or**

reject this pattern means that freedom of God who loves me so much that he can let me go. This very same God who also loved and let go the very image and heart of his own selfhood in Christ, who by dying on the cross, was the ultimate expression of loving to the uttermost and letting go.”

So awaiting the judgement should not be about fear but about courage. Enter into the fire of God’s love. Don’t give up and succumb to despair. Do not possess selfishly what is freely given. But live and love passionately, prepared for the pain of having to let go, of having to die as we await with hope the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we await with hope the end of days and the final judgement.