

Homily based on the readings from December 23, 2025 (Malachi 3.1-4, 23-24; Luke 1.57-66)

At this time of year, there are often quite a few public performances of Handel's *Messiah* – for example, there was one this past Friday at Connecticut College, put on by the Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra. In case you are unfamiliar with this work, it is a monumental oratorio – a musical composition for orchestra and voices – that essentially recounts the entire story of God's salvation of humanity. The lyrics are taken from numerous books of the Bible – especially Isaiah, the Psalms, and First Corinthians. (Even if you are not partial to this sort of music, I am sure you would recognize at least a few sections – particularly the famous *Hallelujah* chorus.)

It is no coincidence that today's first reading – from the Book of Malachi – is heavily quoted in the *Messiah*. One line, in particular, forms the basis for what is probably my favorite chorus in the entire piece: “And he shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto

the Lord an offering in righteousness.” The term “sons of Levi,” of course, is a reference to the *Levites* – one of the twelve tribes descended from the Patriarch Jacob. In ancient Israel, the Levites – although not necessarily members of the priestly class – held a special responsibility for assisting in the community’s worship. Within the Christian framework, Levites are viewed as the direct precursors to the Order of Deacons. In fact, whenever a deacon sings the *Exsultet* at the opening of the Easter Vigil, he refers to himself as being numbered “among the Levites” – a line I find particularly moving, both as a deacon and as a person of Jewish ancestry.

The point of this passage, of course, is that any of us – whether a deacon, a priest, a bishop, or even the pope himself – is unworthy, through our own merits, to offer the Lord any sacrifice whatsoever. It is only through God’s boundless grace that we are able to participate in any meaningful act of worship. Remember the words we recite shortly before receiving Holy Communion:

Lord, I am not worthy
that you should enter under my roof,
but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.

As Christians, it is essential that we affirm *both* of the key truths that are articulated in this prayer. On the one hand, we must never lose sight of our own unworthiness. If we imagine that we can somehow “earn” salvation on our own, we are indulging in a dangerous delusion. On the other hand, we must never doubt the Lord’s ability to heal our brokenness. If we convince ourselves that not even God can make us clean, then we are denying the fullness of his saving power. In the end, whether we are Levites or not, God grants *all* of us the opportunity for purification, so that – united with our brothers and sisters in Christ – we may worship him *in Spirit and in truth*. That is the *promise* of the coming Messiah, and the *reality* of the *grace* God bestows on all his faithful children.