

The 33rd Sunday in Ord. Time – November 12-13, 2022

As the Church's liturgical year draws to a close, the scriptures focus our attention on the fact of Jesus' second coming and the end of this world. There is a mystery to Christ's return so we find people taking different viewpoints about it.

A central theme to Jesus' teaching had been the kingdom of God. For six centuries the Jews had suffered under one kingdom after another – the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. God had made many promises in the past assuring them that they were special to him and that they would be blessed in many ways because of his special love for them. Even six hundred years of foreign rule did not lessen their hopes that God would liberate them from their enemies.

When John the Baptist, came he announced that God would soon send a savior who would initiate God's Kingdom. Jesus, like John, proclaimed that the kingdom was near and that sinners must change their ways. As Jesus proclaimed the kingdom, a question that came up frequently was, "when is this going to happen?" Jesus made it clear that no one can predict when it would happen. His concern, as we see in today's gospel, is that his disciples be ready for struggles as he experienced and that they should remain faithful to him and to his mission.

As St. Luke writes today's gospel, the ascension of Jesus has happened some years earlier and the temple has in fact been destroyed. Luke and the other gospel writers try to show the people of that time that with Christ the kingdom has been initiated and growing, but that it is not able to be observed in some political way as other kingdoms because the kingdom is within them.

This, however, is too difficult for some of the baptized to accept. They want Jesus to come back in power now. So they latch on to the pronouncements of false prophets who identify conflicts and natural disaster as signs that the return of Jesus is near. Jesus tells them not to be deceived by such persons.

But we have people then and through the ages obsessed about predicting the time of Christ's return. On the other hand, we

have people who limit life to this world and pay little thought to a coming day of judgement

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The traditional Christian response has been neither of these. Rather it sees that God has revealed a larger picture of salvation history and how we are to live with that in view. It sees the fact of Christ's second coming as telling us important things about how we are to deal with the short period of time that we have between our birth and our death. **First**, that this world is very temporary. It is not the main stage for our lives and not the final state of anything. **Secondly**, that our time here is one of testing of our hearts and minds. It is therefore hugely significant, but not so much in regard to this life itself as in where it is leading us. Christians know that our eternal destiny is decided by how we handle all things in this life. At the same time we put no ultimate hope in anything in this world, knowing that it is all passing, and that our hope should be reserved for what is eternal.

This is where today's first reading fits in. The prophet Malachi lived about 470 years before Christ. Many Jews at that time had become apathetic about their religious duties and about keeping the Commandments. They saw how evildoers continued to insult and test God and yet continued to enjoy success and prosperity. In the face of this unfairness, the faithful were asking, "What do we gain by keeping the Lord's commands?"

In response, Malachi warns his listeners that the day of reward and punishment is coming. Fire is the symbol that represents both reward and punishment. It will be a scorching heat for those who have not followed God's ways but will bring warmth and healing to those who have been faithful.

Likewise in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians – we hear that many of the Thessalonians expected Jesus to return almost immediately, so they gave up their jobs and sort of waited around for Jesus to return. Paul told them to get back to work, and that if they did not work, they should not eat – that is – they should not free load off the community.

Again, Jesus said that no one knows the time when the kingdom will come. As he says this, he is speaking of a different kind of time. The signs of the kingdom's arrival will come at a decisive

moment in time, but not at a precise chronological moment in time. We should not be thinking of the end of time as something like the stroke of midnight. Rather, it is a time that comes when it comes, -- inevitably yes, but unpredictably, like a thief in the night. Thus, there is one thing Jesus did say most definitely, we must always be prepared for it could come upon us very suddenly.

As much as Jesus proclaimed the joy of salvation, he was also a realist. Overcoming the powers of evil would be difficult. Speaking as a prophet, we hear Jesus in today's gospel foretell the pains that would precede the full coming of his kingdom. The Temple would be destroyed and catastrophic events such as wars and natural disasters will come and go, but the end is not yet. First, the disciples would suffer for being Jesus' disciples, just as Jesus would have to suffer. The powers of evil will not give up without a fight; but the powers of evil will not frustrate God's plan of salvation.

In our society, we have difficulties with things moving slowly. We need to change and develop endurance and perseverance. So much still has to change. We are far from the end. But by our perseverance and God's grace, we will secure our lives in the end.

Until Jesus comes again, we prepare for that day by gathering together in faith, by listening to his words, and by being nourished by his own body and blood. Sometimes, life is a joy; sometimes it is a great struggle. In the process, God is making something new. In the end, for those who have been faithful to God, evil, sickness and death will not have its way with us; we shall rejoice in God's peace and love forever.

There is freedom and joy in this teaching of Christ. Those whose hopes are limited to this world alone experience suffering and tragedy as overwhelming because it seems so final. Christians know better. They know that "this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."