

Homily Sunday 33B: 18 Nov 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

I suppose someone upstairs has a sense of humor. This is Commitment Sunday, when we're supposed to make pledges to the Bishop's Annual Appeal. Well, the readings this day treat of the happy topic of the end of the world. In a strange sort of way, I think it all makes sense. It makes sense because we Catholics have an attitude towards the world's end that merits attention. It's a perspective that comes from our faith, a perspective called Christian hope!

For starters, we Catholics readily admit that the world's expiration date is unknown. No human being has access to this information. The Lord himself in today's Gospel spells it out. Only God the Father knows. So all those would-prophets who run about claiming to know the day and the hour are simply misled, at best, if not downright dishonest. As young as I like to believe myself to be, I have lived long enough to see the end of the world predicted several times, and as many times the predictions proved false. In fact, so called visionaries here and there have been expecting the world to end since apostolic times.

Second, we do know the end of the world coincides with the return of Jesus in glory. That's also declared in the gospel. The end of the world doesn't mean the virtual extinction of the human race, with a tiny remnant left to fight for survival against some fearsome menace on a post-apocalyptic battleground. That sort of thrilling scenario is the stuff of TV and cinematic drama, but it takes inspiration from the goal of gaining an audience and making a buck rather than from study of the Sacred Page. The end of the world will come when the Lord returns; this event is called parousia in the NT and more commonly is referred to as the Second Coming.

Third, knowing that the world is going to end with the Lord's triumphant return has implications for how we ought to live here and now. What we're supposed to be doing is making this world ready to receive the Lord Jesus. Now this means avoiding 2 extremes, 2 ways of drawing false implications from the Christian faith on this point. One extreme is to live as if the fact of Jesus' return means that we shouldn't waste efforts on improving the world, a strategy of minimal engagement with terrestrial realities. This is often problematic with folks who think that the end of the world is imminent. They just decide to hang it all up and lollygag about until the Lord returns. In the meantime, they become a general nuisance to everyone else. The issue has been with us for a while: just read Paul's letters to the Thessalonians and you'll find he was already having to combat this attitude in one of his churches founded 1900 years ago.

The opposite attitude is to live as if Jesus will never return. And this is a more widespread problem among believers nowadays, particularly in our affluent corner of the earth. We Catholics in the USA are among those who have done rather well by the world; we tend to be well-educated, enjoy a comfortable standard of living, and generally have assimilated pretty well to mainstream American culture. And because we've made ourselves very much at home here,

we're tempted to think that making good here and now is the most important, if not the only thing to be worrying about. Oh yes, Jesus may come, someday, somehow, but let's not worry about it--God helps those who help themselves! This lack of concern about the Lord's return can prove fatal for our eternal destiny; this sort of complacency echoes the attitude of those foolish servants in Jesus' parables, who forget that their Master will return someday at an hour they do not expect and demand an accounting of their stewardship.

The upshot of this lesson about the end of the world is that we Catholics here and now ought to be transforming our region of this terrestrial habitation into a place where Jesus will feel at home upon his return. If Jesus were to come back this instant, how would he judge the way we are fulfilling our religious duties, namely, loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? And secondly, how would he judge the way we are loving our neighbor, esp. our poor neighbors who require our assistance? It's this latter question, the issue of our love for our needy neighbor, that brings us to the twin topics of both the Bishop's Annual Appeal and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Both these appeals for your generous support are directed to helping out our neighbors in need. The Bishop's Annual Appeal funds a broad variety of ministries right here within our diocese: social service and outreach ministries, such as the various forms of assistance provided by Catholic Charities; Faith Formation ministries such as the Bishop Helmsing Institute; pastoral programs which support vocations, youth ministry, and the respect life office. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, launched in 1970, is directed to a broader array of needy people across the USA, although 25% of the funds collected stay within our diocese. This campaign helps people break out of the cruel cycle of poverty by giving them the skills and resources that help them help themselves; to borrow a well-worn cliché, it is a hand up, not just a hand out; you can read more about this program in the bulletin insert.

I encourage everyone to support both these initiatives, the BAA and CCHD. You should already have received info in the mail about the BAA. If you have already made your pledge to the appeal, I thank you. If not, you'll have a couple minutes after the homily to fill out one of the pledge cards in the pews and put it in the collection. Also, there will be a 2nd collection today for the CCHD. Again, please know of my gratitude. Your generosity will help make earth a little more like heaven, so that our heavenly king Jesus Christ will feel at home when he returns.