

Horsemen of the Apocalypse
1st Sunday of Advent (C)
(Lk 21:25-36)

In the Book of Revelation, St. John describes a vision of seven seals being opened by the Lamb. These seals unleash the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” which represent suffering and calamities that will cause large scale death: “*the sword, famine, pestilence, wild beasts*” (Rv 6:8). Additionally, there will be persecution and martyrdom for Christians (Rv 6:9), and great terror before the power of God (Rv 6:16).

The Book of Revelation expands upon the final prophecies which Jesus made before the crucifixion about the end times, which are to be witnessed by the people of his generation. These calamities came upon Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D., when the sword, famine, and pestilence destroyed the rebellious city, and the Romans demolished the Temple. Jesus forewarns the Church about the difficulties of the “end-times,” which last from the Resurrection until the Second Coming. The upheavals that began in Jerusalem will bring such terror that “*people will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world*” (Lk 21:26).

In the United States, the current generation has lived in an unusual and extended time of peace and prosperity, to the point where hearts have become “*drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life*” (Lk 21:34). Ours is a population ripe for the fear spoken of in the Gospel. The most significant aspect of the recent covid pestilence is not the death it causes (the disease is actually eminently treatable). Rather, it is the fear and anxiety that goes with it, almost all of which is artificially manipulated for the purpose of control and profit.¹

Christians must recognize the “signs of the times,” and see past the ordinary forces of nature to the malice of dark powers that seek to enslave and kill, as they did with Nazi Germany, and Communism. Like the Christians of the first generation, we must navigate the various events and upheavals that are bound to occur, finding the path of security through faith and inner peace. Jesus says, “*stand erect and raise your heads, for your redemption is at hand*” (Rv 21:28). When apocalyptic events take place, we must not succumb to fear, but recognize that the increased activity of evil is a harbinger of a greater but less visible activity of God. In each such episode, the battle is moving in a significant way toward God’s final victory, though we may not see how from our perspective of suffering and persecution. But we have a role to play in that struggle.

¹ From the predictions about inflation and supply chain problems, Americans may soon be visited by the black horseman of “famine” (Rv 6:5), in addition to the pale horseman of viral pestilence.

In order to have proper perspective and be able to stand fast in the days of turmoil, we must “*be vigilant at all times and pray*” (Lk 21:36). Prayer is the conscious effort on our part to look for the Lord in current circumstances. Prayer is the conversation that brings wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, as well as the other gifts of the Holy Spirit: fortitude and strength. Jesus says we must pray in order to have strength on the day of tribulation. Through prayer we find peace and conquer fear, and find courage to give witness.

For our part we must not live in darkness and fear, and we must not be fooled by the manipulation. Faith in Christ brings strength and the ability to speak the truth. As we light the candles of the Advent wreath, counting down the weeks to Christmas, we ourselves must be like those lights, giving guidance, comfort, and hope to people around us, leading them through these dark times to Christ the Lord, the conqueror of evil.