

33RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 13:24-32

Jesus said to his disciples, "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

REFLECTION 1: THE END OF THE WORLD - POSTPONED

It's impossible to understand today's first and third readings without an appreciation of what the Bible refers to as 'apocalyptic' or the happenings at the end of the world, this planet earth. The Bible isn't a book: it's a library, not only does it contain lots of different books written by different authors at various times but like all libraries, it contains works composed in different categories. We need only walk into our local libraries and look at the names above the bookshelves - history, fiction, reference, biographies etc. For instance, understanding the Book of Jonah would rule out anyone from trying to explain how a human being could live in the belly of a fish for 3 days and 3 nights. Knowing the category is essential for interpretation. Those who viewed the film 'Finding Private Ryan' which was complete fiction got a vivid insight into the horror of war, far better than a careful historical narrative.

People who read the Bible will have a hard time with today's reading because both these readings are apocalyptic writings (a revelation of the end of the world); they were written by people who experienced great hardship and needed to know they would survive.

Our first reading (Dan. 12:1-3) describes a time when the Syrians, who tried to impose their language, culture and religion of the Jews, occupied Israel. The Jews found solace in the belief that someday the Syrians would be defeated and leave. That belief gave them courage to endure present trials. God and goodness would ultimately prevail.

Our Gospel was written by the Evangelist Mark (Mk. 13: 24-32) during the early days of the church's existence. The church was an outside group and was therefore despised and persecuted by the government. Since Christians were impotent against the power of Rome, they had no choice but to survive as well as they could in the hope of final vindication by God. The Gospel describes the end of time and that the world will not go on forever. And since it will end, it must end with a bang or a whimper into another kind of existence. Therefore one must take a stance. The image of Jesus means that creation had a purpose, history was governed by divine providence and individual lives had value and meaning. The image of God gathering his faithful people means that goodness will be rewarded and life will be endless happiness with God. These images gave our forbearers hope of ultimate victory, even under terrible persecution and slaughter.

But what about us? Since we are not persecuted, we have no need for this hopeful, encouraging liberation. Or do we? Well, besides being involved in several wars, living in a dangerous world, being trapped in personal sins – we are part of a disintegrating earth, a history rushing towards its end. In our

busyness in our plans, we forget the basic reality that it will all end, tomorrow or in a million years. Whether our lives have meaning or not, goodness or evil will triumph, we will live happily with God or slip into nothingness. That will happen one day, but these critical choices are made every day. Apocalypse is always now.

REFLECTION 2: THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN

If someone from outer space were to ask us what period we are now living in, I suppose it would be safe to say that we are living in the period between the first and second coming of the Lord. This is the time of missionary activity, when, like the harvester, the church will be gathered from the four corners of the earth into the kingdom of God. The Gospel must be preached to all nations before the Lord comes.

The scenario of the final events in Mark's Gospel for today is on a massive scale. The evangelist writes about the day of the Lord, the Day of Judgement. Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, he tells of a time when the stars will not give their light, the sun dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light. However we need not be terrified as Jesus is using this customary expression to speak about something that lies beyond human understanding. It is not to be taken literally, yet it recalls for us the mighty power of God as the day of Christ's return arrives. He is to come, Mark tells us, in the clouds, with great power and glory. Daniel (second reading) sees 'one like the son of man' coming on the clouds of heaven. Jesus will use this verse again when he stands before the high priest and says; 'You will see the son of man seated at the right hand of the power with the clouds of heaven' (Mk. 14: 62). On another occasion Jesus is using scripture to illustrate his own future triumph.

Jesus also speaks about the gathering together of the elect, who are committed to follow Christ, unlike Matthew who makes reference to a separation, sheep on the right and goats on the left. Mark is silent on the destiny of those who are not among the elect. Jesus makes reference to the fig tree as a type of parable, its breaking into leaf as a sign of the arrival of summer. So also with Christ heralding his imminent return. Jesus says that only the Father and not even the Son knows the day and the hour of the end of the world. Here we are faced with the mystery of Jesus' human knowledge of what the Father knows. Obviously not all the truths of God are communicated to us humans.

At the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, the apostles ask Jesus about the time of the restoration of Israel and Jesus replies, 'It is not for you to know the times or the periods the Father has set by his own authority'. We can only conclude that there are hidden things we are not to know. The humanity of the Son of God does not lessen his divinity, rather it brings home to us the humility of God. When the Son of man comes, the evangelist Luke gives us the following advice, 'when these things begin to take place stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near' (Lk. 21: 28). We are rather like that man who was told by his doctor that he had only 6 months to live. As he had no means of paying for the consultation, the doctor gave him another 6 months!