

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Daniel 12:1-3

Psalm 15

Hebrews 10:11-14, 18

Mark 13:24-32

We have reached the last two weeks of the liturgical year. Once more, we have walked this journey of faith—a journey both old and ever new—side-by-side with the Church throughout the world. Our liturgical year is a precious gift, one which enables us to mark time with spiritual significance, and to live the mystery of Christ within history. Moreover, through the gift of the liturgical year we receive a seed of eternity that transforms this world from within and opens it to the Kingdom of Heaven. And on this penultimate Sunday of the liturgical year, the Church invites us to look ahead to Jesus Christ's return at the end of time.

In the early Church, there was a strong preoccupation with the end times. Already in some of the New Testament letters Sts Paul and Peter find themselves having to calm their readers down somewhat, given that they were expecting Jesus to return very soon and were on constant watch for signs of his coming.

Some Christian denominations are still very much focused on the end times, and Pentecostal groups regularly split into separate denominations over disagreements about where in the end times schedule we currently are. The apocalypse certainly holds a firm grip on the popular imagination too, with countless movies, books, and songs dealing with the end of the world. And while there is certainly much we could do to treat creation better, the more hysterical elements in the climate change conversation could likewise be seen as a secular manifestation of this.

In contrast to all this, we Catholics probably don't tend to think about these things all that much these days, certainly compared with previous eras of the Church. And there are some good reasons for why we probably don't emphasise the end of time as much as some other Christians do – and yet by placing these readings before us towards the end of the liturgical year, the Church is reminding us that it still remains an important part of our belief and one that we would do well to reflect on from time to time.

So, a few preliminary points about the Gospel text. Clearly, it is very difficult text to wrestle with, both because of its dramatic themes and colourful imagery. It speaks of a future that exceeds our own categories and for this reason Jesus uses images and words taken from the Old Testament.

When Jesus says that “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away,” we should clarify that he is not referring to the Kingdom of Heaven in which God and the angels and saints dwell for eternity, but rather he is referring to what we sometimes speak of as “the heavens”—that is, the sky and the stars—in other words, a this-worldly reality.

Indeed, the expression *heaven and earth* occurs frequently in the Bible to refer to the whole universe, the entire created cosmos. And so Jesus declares that all created things are destined to “pass away” – all of creation is marked by finitude, including those elements divinised by ancient mythologies. In contrast, Jesus notes that his words “will not pass away”, that is to say they are part of God and therefore eternal.

Another tricky line is when Jesus says, “I tell you solemnly, before this generation has passed away all these things will have taken place.” You can see why the early Church had a strong preoccupation with Christ’s return, and expected it to happen very soon. And this can present us with a bit of a problem – if Jesus is indeed talking about the end times here, this clearly did not happen within a generation of his saying this, which leads some to question whether Jesus was just another false prophet.

One explanation often offered is that Jesus did not use the term “generation” in a literal sense – but that it is closer in meaning to “age”, as in “before this age has come to an end.” So for instance, we speak of “the age of the Church”, in contrast with the age of the Law in the Old Testament. Indeed, Peter reminds us in one of his letters that, to God, a thousand years are like yesterday, come and gone (2 Peter 3:8-9). As such, it is the mercy of God that is given as an explanation for the alleged delay of the second coming.

Others speculate that much of this is symbolic language used by Jesus to refer not to the end times but to the battle that he would shortly win on the cross – a victory that indeed did take place within that generation. According to this reading, the cosmic powers—the sun, the moon, and the stars—are symbolic of how we structure our universe of meaning. In effect, Jesus is saying that the way we customarily govern, guide, and order our lives... is all about to change.

And indeed, his death was a judgement on the most respectable powers-that-be, both the Jewish authorities and Roman authorities—the keepers of right order—because despite their respectability they took part in killing the Lord of Life. And his resurrection was a victory over that most seemingly constant of facts – the fact of death. By rising Jesus shows that death no longer has the final say. Jesus’ death and resurrection has turned life as we know it upside-down.

Apocalyptic literature is popular because, although it speaks of a future reality, it embodies a present hope for an otherwise deflated people. So for instance, as we are confronted with images of wars in distant lands and the threat of violence closer to home, or as we wrestle with the various injustices and sufferings of our personal lives, people have long found hope in the assurance that, when everything is said and done, all things will be set right by the Lord.

But in light of all this colourful imagery, it’s important to remember that Jesus won his decisive victory, not in a fiery battle, but by undercutting the logic of violence on the cross. He let himself be attacked, and forgave his attackers – and *this* is how the

prince of darkness was definitively overcome. As such, we should be wary of notions of cosmic warfare at the end of time that mirror too closely our own propensity for violence.

Let me leave you with one final thought. We are told that we will not know the day or the hour ... but it is worth considering for a moment what would happen if we *did* know the time of our end – either our personal end or our collective end. What effect would that have on our lives?

Shortly before my ordination to the diaconate, one of the priests on the faculty of my college gave us a very moving homily about our fellow candidates for ordination a few centuries before at the Venerable English College in Rome. The late 16th and early 17th century was a time of severe persecution of the Catholic Church in England, and their seminarians were studying in Rome and elsewhere because there was no way for them to study back in England. More to the point, they knew that almost certain death awaited them within a couple of years of their return to serve the Catholics in their native land. Indeed, the English College acquired the title “Venerable” precisely because of the sheer number of martyrs it produced at that time.

The point our faculty member was making in this homily was this: if we were one of those candidates for ordination, instead of being in our present circumstances, what impact would that have on us? No doubt it would have a way of clarifying what really matters, of narrowing our focus, and it would lead us to dispense with a lot of the more superfluous stuff that we fill our time with.

And this I think is the reason that we are encouraged to periodically dwell on the question of the end times. Though we do not know the day or the hour—and perhaps *because* we don’t know it—we ought to live each day as if it could be our last. If Jesus Christ were to return tomorrow, would we be ready? And if not, what should we do to make ourselves ready?