

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY – C
November 18, 2007

We have arrived at the last couple Sundays of the Church year, and in just two weeks, we begin the season of Advent, our four-week spiritual preparation for Christmas. As we get closer to Advent and the beginning of a new liturgical year, our scripture readings take on a different tone, because the focus is on the final things: death, final judgment, heaven, hell, purgatory.

Today's readings do just that, but they do it so well that they leave us puzzled and perhaps even a bit depressed. Some of us have heard the most recent predictions on the History Channel that the world will end on a specific date in 2012, I don't remember the exact date. And I think all of us at one time or another have heard some of the fundamentalist preachers on television who love to proclaim that the end of the world is just around the corner. The OT prophet Malachi, in the first reading, thought the same thing, that the day of the Lord was coming. And it didn't come.

In a passage of Luke's Gospel that comes shortly after the one we just heard, Jesus says "this generation will not pass away" until all the predictions about the return of the Son of Man will be fulfilled. Even St. Paul expected to be alive when Jesus returned in all his glory. Yet none of these expectations have been fulfilled, and every one of the present day preachers who sets a particular date for the end of the world has to keep revising his timetable when the date passes and nothing happens. So far, everyone has been wrong.

What does the Catholic Church officially teach about when the end will come? Actually it doesn't, and the belief that the world is about to end has never been part of Catholic teaching. Instead, we are encouraged to live in the here and now, aware that the world will certainly end *some day*, but doing our best to live good and holy lives in the meantime. So then, what is this gospel trying to tell us, and why does it sound so depressing? In order to understand this, we have to go back several hundred years before Jesus.

In 587 BC, the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, destroyed the city and the Temple, and deported the Jewish people to Babylon. This exile was a terrible time for the Jews and it lasted for nearly 50 years. When at last they were able to return, they had to rebuild their lives, their homes, and their Temple. Naturally, all of this took time. But at last, in 515 BC, the Temple was completed. It wasn't as beautiful as the original Temple of Solomon, but it was a Temple, and they were proud of it.

Then, much later, beginning in the year 19 BC, King Herod enlarged and decorated the Temple, and it was magnificent, ranking among the wonders of the ancient world. Its plaza covered 35 acres, and the building itself was made of huge white stones, perfectly cut and pieced together with absolute precision. The roof was gold and silver. No expense had been spared to build a house of worship that was intended to last until the end of the world. This project took until the year 64 AD to complete, 31 years after the death of Jesus.

But only 6 years later, in 70 AD, the Temple was destroyed stone by stone by the Romans as a punishment for Jewish uprisings against them. Today, only a few stones of the substructure remain, and this is what is referred to as the Wailing Wall. I've had the great privilege of standing and praying at that very wall three times in the last 25 years. Now this destruction is what Jesus is referring to when he says, "It will all be torn down." But symbolically, of course, he's also referring to the end of time.

Today's Gospel ends with a sentence that is found only in St. Luke's Gospel: "By your perseverance you will secure your lives." The word *perseverance* is sometimes translated as *patience* or *endurance*. These are not common or popular virtues in 21st century America. We want fast food, fast cars and fast computers. We have short attention spans and so we now communicate in sound bites, emails and text messages.

The kind of perseverance recommended here, though, is not as much patience as a kind of active resistance in the face of opposition, like resisting an enemy, and is based on the idea of hope. So hope and perseverance are two sides of the same coin; we have to have both. Hope without perseverance is nothing more than anxiety, and ends in madness or insanity. Perseverance without hope causes an attitude of resignation, fatalism and indifference.

As Christians, we hope for the full coming of God's kingdom, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and then, of course, the just rewards and punishments. We expect that these will all come about in God's own time and method. In the meantime, we try to live our lives as people of faith, hope and love, fully aware of the fragility of human existence and of the world around us.

In the midst of fast-paced change, we need the biblical kind of patience and perseverance to live one day at a time, seizing the moment and living it to its fullness, while looking forward in hope to eternal life in God's kingdom.

The truth, of course, is that if we focus too much on the possibility of future destruction, we miss not only all the joys of the present but also what we are called to do as Christians of today, which is to live out the gospel message.

As a community of believers that embraces all people and all cultures, the Church possesses a unique ability to hear the voices of the suffering in all languages and to see the image of God in people of every creed and nationality and color. What we have to realize and fully accept is that human suffering, and even human sinfulness, can offer us something we can't get anywhere else, and that's an opportunity for renewal, reflection, and the chance to develop a deeper sense of hope for ourselves and the world.

Our path to resurrection and glory does not come about through isolated acts of heroic virtue, but rather through a day by day faithfulness to our prayer life and a practical, realistic spirituality, and that's something that's available to all of us, with a little perseverance and patience. And so, instead of living in constant fear of God's wrath at the end of time, we are called to rejoice in his goodness to us right here and now.