

Homily for the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

November 13, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Malachi 3:19-20a (The Day of the Lord is coming.)

Responsory: Psalm 98 (The Lord comes to rule the earth with justice.)

Second Reading: 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12 (Conduct yourselves in an orderly way.)

Gospel: Luke 21:5-19 (Jesus predicts cataclysms and persecutions.)

You can tell that we're approaching the end of the liturgical year. This is the time of year when the Scripture readings at Mass turn very dark and scary. In the first reading, the Prophet Malachi announces that "the day is coming, blazing like an oven, when all the proud and all evildoers" will be burned up in the fire of God's wrath. Jesus' threats are no less frightening, as he speaks about the horrors that people will experience on the earth and in the sky. And, unlike Malachi, Jesus does *not* say that only evildoers will suffer. As many good and righteous people gaze in wonderment at their magnificently adorned Temple, he ominously declares, "the days will come when there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down." And, as if the prospect of losing their beloved Temple wasn't enough to scare the living daylights out of everybody, Jesus also warns of wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines and plagues, and much more. Just imagine how terrifying that must have sounded to the people in the crowd.

The dire threats aren't limited to cataclysmic events affecting the earth and sky, either. Jesus tells his disciples that they will be *personally* attacked and persecuted for their Christian faith. So, not only will the righteous not be *exempt* from danger, they will be *targeted*. They will be seized and handed over to both religious and secular authorities, all because of their belief in Jesus. Even their own relatives and friends will turn against them. But, Jesus tells them not to worry about these injustices and calamities that will come their way. In fact, he says to *look forward* to them, for this will be their opportunity to give testimony to Christ. There is no greater honor for a Christian than to give *public witness* to his faith, even if that opportunity comes about through persecution and violence. And, Jesus assures his followers that their witness will be *powerful*, for he will give them the words that they must speak – words which all their adversaries will be "powerless to resist or refute." So, there's no need to fear anything or anyone. By their perseverance they will secure their lives for all eternity.

The combination of dire warning and hopeful exhortation that we see in today's readings is characteristic of *all* apocalyptic literature, both in the prophetic books of the Bible and in other contemporary sources. This form of literature became especially popular among Jews around the last two centuries before Christ and into the first two centuries A.D. Keep in mind that the ancient world was a very violent place. Wars and insurrections were common occurrences. Weaker nations found themselves constantly at the mercy of greater powers. The Jews suffered under the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and, finally – the mightiest empire that the world had ever seen – the Romans. Peace and security never seemed to last very long, and the cost was always subservience to whatever

empire occupied their land at the time. Yet, the Jewish people continued to believe in a power far greater than all of these earthly kingdoms. They believed that God would triumph in the end, and that God's people would finally live at peace in *God's Kingdom*, which would last forever. That was their great hope, and it was the often coded message embedded in all of those frightening, apocalyptic visions. The earthly powers would not give up without a fight. So, God's faithful ones would be sorely tested. Only those who persevered to the end would be able to witness his final, glorious victory on "the Day of the Lord."

Many of these prophetic warnings about awful things to come are quite difficult to interpret with any certainty. We're often left wondering whether the Prophet was talking about something *imminent*, which was about to happen in his own day, or something that was perhaps decades or even centuries away. For example, many of the "Day of the Lord" prophecies in the Old Testament appear to refer to events that happened during the Prophet's lifetime, but they *also* seem to have been fulfilled in a much deeper way centuries later *in Jesus*. In some cases, the fulfillment seems to come about through the Incarnation itself. We hear those readings during the *Advent* season. Others seem to be fulfilled by Jesus' death and resurrection. We hear those during *Lent*, especially Holy Week. So, we generally cannot point to a single historical event and say definitively, "The Prophet was speaking about *this*." Instead, if we ask whether a prophet of doom was speaking about the fall of Jerusalem, the end of the world, or some other cataclysmic event, the answer often seems to be, "probably *all of those*."

Jesus' words in today's gospel are just as enigmatic. He could be predicting the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. Or, he could be preparing his followers for his crucifixion just a few days hence, using the Temple as an image of his own body. Or, he could be foreshadowing his second coming in glory. Maybe all three! Likewise, the persecutions that he envisions could be the opposition that his followers would face from their fellow Jews in the immediate aftermath of the Resurrection, or they could refer to later persecutions of Christians ordered by Roman Emperors over a period of three centuries. Or, again, it could be both.

Every time that a prophet issued one of these frightful warnings, however, the message for *believers* was always essentially the same: to remain *hopeful*, for their salvation was close at hand. Chaos and terror are not signs that all is lost, but rather, signs that the time of *redemption* is drawing near. In the words of the Prophet Malachi: "For you who fear my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays."

It is *always* easy to look at the world around us and see signs of the apocalypse. Frankly, Jesus' predictions about wars and insurrections, natural disasters and plagues, remind me of the year *2021*, which we somehow survived. Some false prophets predicted that we would *not*. But, people of faith should know better than to get caught up in doomsday prophecies and conspiracy theories. Jesus says, "See that you not be deceived, for many will come in my name, saying..., 'The time has come.' *Do not follow them!*" (Especially on Twitter!) Instead, we believers turn to *the Lord*, who has always been our refuge, and we put our trust in *him*. Perhaps our faith will be tested. Perhaps we will be called upon to witness to Christ. If so, he will give us the words that we must speak. And, by our perseverance, we will secure our lives.