

Thirty Third Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2009

When we look at the unfolding of human history, we realize that the world has been always there. It has existed in the past; it exists now and, very likely, it will exist tomorrow. Such an observation has the risk of letting us think that nothing will change at all, not only now but even in the future. The spiritual truth today's readings bring to our attention is that we better be careful about such a perception. Nothing is eternal on earth; the world will one day come to an end.

The first reading describes in an apocalyptic language the vision Daniel had about the liberation of Israel. At that time, the Jewish people were occupied by the Syrians who persecuted them and imposed on them customs contrary to their religion. The prophet announces a day of God's visit for the liberation of his people. He promises the destruction of the enemy powers and the restoration of God's righteousness.

That time will be a time of great distress when the angel of God will destroy the world dominated by evil. However, those who are faithful to God and whose name is written in the book of life will be preserved. This is why even those who died a long time ago will rise from the dust and live forever. That time will be also a time of retribution of the just who will shine in the presence of God like the stars, while the evil ones will undergo everlasting horror and disgrace.

With this prophecy of Daniel, the resurrection of the dead is attested openly for the first time in the Old Testament. The resurrection of the dead is based on the belief and hope that God will never betray those who love him. On the contrary, he will always intervene in their favor and reward their faithfulness by granting them eternal life in his kingdom.

If that is the case, it means that human death in itself is not a pure and simple destruction, but a beginning of a new life with God. In the same way, what we call "the end of the world" is not an end in itself. Rather, it is the beginning of a new era with God.

In the meantime, as we are still on earth, we have to wait with patience and in fidelity the day we will be sharing in God's life. That is the point the Gospel brings to us as it speaks of the second coming of Jesus at the end of time.

First of all, the Gospel describes with apocalyptic images the manifestations that will accompany the return of Christ. There will be tribulation and shaking in the sky and on earth. There will be confusion all over the world when the sun will be darkened, the stars will fall down and the moon will not give its light.

However, these signs should not be taken literally, as many fundamentalists do. The main reason is that the return of Christ cannot be predicted according to human logic or the laws of nature. It is first of all a spiritual event that will transcend human history and its laws. That is why Jesus says that nobody knows the time or the hour of its occurrence. It means also that there are some things whose knowledge Jesus has left into the hands of his Father alone. For that reason, those who are occupied with working on dates and timetables about Jesus' second coming are just wrong.

It is also true that Jesus will come back as he has promised, because even if heaven and earth can pass away, his words will not pass away. However, it would be a mistake to use the apocalyptic images describing his return to force people to live in fear of God's judgment at the end of time. The fear that the end of the world is near has never convinced anybody to abandon sin and follow the Christian way of life. True faith in God does not come out of fear, but of love. As a matter of fact, what these apocalyptic images intend to tell us is only that the return of Christ will be an important event that will determine the fate of the whole universe.

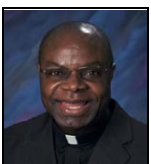
Another thing the Gospel tells us is that at his coming back, Jesus will send his angels to gather his elect from all over the world. He will not gather them in order to destroy them, but to save them. As understood, the return of Jesus will be a joyful event that will bring our salvation to its completion. It will never be a terrible event for those who love him and are faithful to him.

However, we have to stay alert and vigilant like a farmer who is able to recognize the signs that mark the coming of the new season in order to plant. That is why what is important is not the question of the return of Christ, but of our attitude in the awaiting of his return. Suppose, for instance, that we come to learn today that we have just a couple of days to live, how will we react to such news? What change will we bring in our priorities, especially with regard to our relationship with God?

The importance of this question has to open our eyes to another dimension of the return of Christ, namely his daily coming to us in the ordinary circumstances of life. We must learn to recognize Jesus as he comes to us in the hungry, the poor, and the needy. Let us not forget that when people love each other, when they tell each other the truth and not lie, when they strive to work in unity and in respect of each other, Jesus is present. When we step forward for the right thing and the right action for the good of our fellows, giving witness to the truth of Jesus, he is present.

Jesus tells us that we have to take a lesson from a fig tree. When its leaves change, that is a sign of new season that is about to come. Here Jesus invites us to readiness and preparedness. He will come back even if many do not take it seriously. We live in a culture that tries to tell us that as it was yesterday, it will be tomorrow. The truth is that things can change; the world can come to an end. We have to be in a state of readiness and preparedness to meet the Lord with a clear conscience. Let us pray God to help us prepare our hearts every day for the second coming of Christ. Let us ask him to give us courage and perseverance in suffering endured for the sake of our faith. May God bless you all!

Daniel 12, 1-3; Hebrews 10, 11-14, 18; Mark 13, 24-32



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