

33rd. Sunday in Ordinary Time

As we get older, we are reminded more frequently of our mortality. We have more medical appointments than we used to have. We go more often to the funerals of our friends and relations. We realize that we cannot manage the large home and garden that we have enjoyed. As we try to read the signs that tell us that our own death is getting closer, we sometimes wonder about the signs that might tell us that the end of the world is not far away either. As Christians we believe that this will be the time when Jesus will come again in glory. Today's gospel invites us to ponder those things.

The thirteenth chapter of St. Mark's gospel is perhaps the hardest chapter of all for us to understand and interpret. It begins with Jesus telling his hearers that the magnificent temple, the heart of Jewish religious worship, will soon be lying in ruins. But this will be a sign that God's victory over evil is near. His disciples then ask their teacher, "When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to happen?"

What Jesus then goes on to say is difficult for us to interpret because it is in the style that we call "apocalyptic". The word "Apocalypse" means a revelation of things that are hidden, or a relation of things that are still in the future. We are familiar with this style of writing in some of the prophetic literature,

especially in the Book of Daniel. We see some of it in each of the synoptic gospels and throughout the Book of Revelation. Its purpose is to give encouragement and hope to people of faith who are suffering, especially those who are being persecuted because of their faith. Apocalyptic literature has been described as the literature of the dispossessed. It is what gives hope to those who have nothing and nobody to hope in except God. Apocalyptic literature uses images that are often drawn from warfare to give us a glimpse into the future when God's victory over evil will be made clear. The faithful will share in the final triumph of God's rule. The judgement of God will mean that those who were faithful will be rewarded and the wicked will be condemned

In our reading today from the prophet Daniel we have a taste of this kind of literature and the imagery associated with it. "There is going to be a time of great distress, unparalleled since nations first came into existence. Of those who lie sleeping in the dust of the earth many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace. Those who have instructed many in virtue will shine as bright as stars for all eternity."

Our gospel today takes us to what could be called the climax of the whole gospel. All throughout Mark's gospel Jesus has made a point of hiding his true identity

as the Messiah of God. He didn't want people to misunderstand the kind of Messiah he was and how he was going to show his utter faithfulness to the one who had sent him. But for his disciples who had experienced his death and Resurrection and were waiting to share in his victory over death, they needed to know how it would all end. In their daily lives many of them were still suffering and his promised return was something that they longed for. Now the gospel can speak of Jesus' return in triumph. "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory."

But this will only happen after a cataclysmic time when the sun and moon will be darkened, the stars will fall out of sky and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. It is a way of speaking about the end of the world as we know it.

The big question is still when this will happen. Jesus addresses that question by using the image of a fig tree. The fig tree was one of the few deciduous trees in Israel and it was bare until the end of Spring. When its new growth came, summer was just around the corner. Jesus tells us that when the end of the world comes then we will know that Jesus is very near. Jesus really doesn't tell us anything about when he will come. He reinforces that by telling us that nobody but the Father knows when that will happen.

It seems that our generation is trying its best to hurry the end of the world along by the many ways that we misuse our fragile earth. Pope Francis has warned us that we all need to look at the ways that we use the earth's resources. He calls us to an ecological conversion to see how dependent we are upon the world in which we live. The bushfires in California this week are another reminder of how fragile our world is. But I don't think that God wants our world to end so soon. There seems to be so much work still to be done to establish the kingdom of God upon earth before the victory parade can begin.

As individuals we will take part in Christ's victory parade when our life on earth is ended. It is only in our concern for others that we want our world to continue to be a place of life-giving beauty and hospitality for future generations. We want our world to be a place where all people can discover the God who creates it in love. We know that the world will end, and we are urged to live each day as people who are ready for that. If we are comfortable with the little picture of our own dying and rising to life again, then we can be comfortable with the bigger picture of the world collapsing around us and the Son of Man coming in the clouds. It is the same Jesus that we get ready to meet at the moment of our death and at the end of our world.