

33rd Sunday, Year B: Warnings of crises to come in the future.

First Reading: Daniel 12:1-3: The future day of judgement;

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:11-14+18: Christ's one, perfect offering;

Gospel: Mark 13:24-32: Watch out! Christ will come again...

Over the years, Christianity has had a reputation for 'doom and gloom', and this has had the effect of putting people off it – especially the young, who (as you would expect) prefer to concentrate on the happier side of life. This Sunday's first reading and gospel do little to dispel religion's gloomy image, as they concentrate on warnings about the future. The technical name for this aspect of religion is 'eschatology', meaning a study of final things – the end of the world, if you like. To be fair, it is not only religious people who go on about this: climate activists warn that our planet is well on the way to becoming uninhabitable, due to global warming. However, the main thrust behind the readings is not a physical threat to the world's future, but a moral one; the feeling is that human evil mounts up so far that the only possible outcome is a clash between the forces of good and evil. Before we write this off as nonsense, we should recall that this was the language many used in the war against Nazi Germany and Japan: people saw World War II as a moral crusade against evil.

That said, the first reading & gospel reflect a writing-style that was popular at the end of the Old Testament period, but which may strike many of us as simply weird. We see the same style in the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse) – people having visions or dreams about the future, and everything being or expressed in symbols or signs, but not meant to be taken literally. The first reading (Daniel 12:1-3), written in the years of conflict in the centuries before Jesus, looks to a future war, when many will be killed. However, the Archangel Michael will appear, to reward the good and punish the wicked. What the writer does state clearly, and in open language, is his belief in a life after death, where *"The learned will shine as brightly as the vault of heaven; those who have instructed many in virtue, as bright as stars for ever"*. That sort of hope amid the threat of war is also a feature of this Sunday's gospel.

Saints Mark, Matthew and Luke each give a sort of 'mini-Apocalypse' in the days before Jesus' arrest in Jerusalem. This Sunday's piece is from Mark's version of it. Along with other 'Apocalypse' - style writing, it is couched in odd language: Sun & Moon will grow dark; stars will crash down; the sky will shake, and so on. The climax will be when Jesus returns in glory, to gather 'his

chosen' from all parts of world. The timing of all this is unknown: Jesus adds: *"But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it....no-one but the Father"*. It is fair to say that early Christians (themselves living in a time of tension and violence) felt that this second coming would be fairly soon. As time went on, and it did not happen, the whole idea of Jesus' early return was put to one side. By the time St John's Gospel was written – decades after St Mark's - the idea, while still believed-in, was definitely 'on the back-burner', in that it had little impact on people's everyday lives. St John does not mention a second coming of Jesus.

Can I raise a related, but difficult, topic here? The first reading referred to wars, and the gospel mentioned 'times of distress'. How far can Jesus' followers go in resisting evil people? It is a lively question for Orthodox Christians in eastern Europe just now. But even in a democracy like ours, people ask if we can see war (or armed conflict) as a morally acceptable last resort for keeping the country safe. Politicians may argue about whether some conflict might be the 'last resort' (eg the Iraq war), but I think all accept the principle that last resorts can happen, and that military forces are a necessity. Churchill, who led us against a ghastly tyranny in 1939-45, used to say: "Jaw-jaw is better than war-war" – meaning that diplomacy had to be the first (and main) way to settle war disputes. For Christians, this is a natural belief: Jesus was the great promoter of peace, but he also knew that sometimes, doing nothing was not an option. The fact that we have a military capability is one reason why western Europe has avoided war since 1945; I thank God for that, but not all will agree.

Last weekend, we remembered the thousands of men and women who gave their lives in service of the country – in both the world wars of the last century, and in many other armed conflicts since. The actual "Remembrance Day" was Nov 11th, when the first world war ended – at the 11th hour, on the 11th day of the 11th month. The date has had a sort of mystical symbolism since – standing for the supreme sacrifice made by people in service of their fellow-citizens. As Catholics, we also pray FOR the dead, not just about them, recalling the sacrifice for the dead offered by the victorious Jews about 164 BC (see 2 Maccabees 12:38-45 – you'll need an RC Bible for this). It has been the custom to have a Mass for the war dead in every church.

What does all this tell us about the sort of people we are? Why do violence and wars happen at all? Whatever you may understand by "original sin", I think there is something 'off-course' about the way humans behave, and

that our enormous potential for good is often spoiled by selfishness and bullying. No society is free from all fault, but the worst has been done by the great dictatorships of the past 150 years. Yet, even in the midst of all the Nazi evil, good people emerged – we recall Saints Teresa Benedicta (Edith Stein) & Max Kolbe, and the German Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer – all 3 killed in concentration camps. As Christians, we must also think of the millions who died for their country “on the other side” – and pray for the repose of their souls, too.

I think this weekend’s first reading & gospel are difficult to relate to our lives, because the language they use is so strange. But the idea of conflict is not unknown to us, and the gospels show that ‘virtue’ includes the giving of the self for others. Bravery in the face of danger is also seen as a ‘sacrifice’ – an act that both helps others and makes the person doing it holy - what ‘sacrifice’ really means. *Fr Jim Dunne.*