

The 33rd Sunday of Year C: The end is nigh....or is it?

1st Reading: Malachi 3:19-20: The “Day of the Lord” will come to burn;

2nd Reading: 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12: Paul’s example of hard work:

Gospel Luke 21:5-19: The destruction of Jerusalem: what it will mean.

I suppose it is appropriate that Remembrance Sunday falls on the day when our readings (at least, the first one and the gospel) talk of death and destruction. Each year, the 33rd Sunday uses biblical readings that focus on the “end” – be it of Jerusalem and the Jewish state that Jesus knew, or more generally, of the world and the human life we now know. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark & Luke all have this material at the same point – just after Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and before his Last Supper, arrest and death.

In this weekend’s gospel, we can imagine Jesus on a sight-seeing tour of the great Temple in Jerusalem: people “were remarking how it was adorned with fine stonework and votive offerings”. Then Jesus puts a damper on their admiration: “The time will come when not a single stone will be left on another – everything will be destroyed.” Spoilsport! (In fact, the Temple and much of the city was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. All that survived was one wall of the Temple, with the cynical idea that it should stay up for the few surviving Jews to cry against. It has been called the “wailing wall” ever since.) In the rest of this very unhappy gospel piece, Jesus warns against deceivers – those who pretend to be God’s representatives, offering reliable advice about how the “end” will come. In history, there have been many people like this; when there is a general air of fear and panic, quack ‘saviours’ often get a following.

However, Jesus also mentions trouble at two levels before the end of the world. First, “Nation will fight against nation.” This weekend’s commemoration of the war dead reminds us that the human race often falls into a death-spiral of tension, over-reaction & unconstrained violence, even against non-combatants. Not only the two world wars of the last century, but also the current war in Ukraine show this to be true. He also mentions natural disasters: earthquakes, plagues and famines. History – not to mention the modern third world – is littered with these problems. Modern science can alleviate them, but not take them away. They are worse when exacerbated by human incompetence & evil.

Jesus’ second level of trouble concerns specifically Christian suffering: “Men will seize you and persecute you...because of my name; that will be your opportunity to bear witness.” Our word ‘martyr’ literally means a witness –

whether the person dies for their beliefs or not. Generally, most people do link martyrdom with death, but that is not what Jesus primarily means here. History has often involved one group persecuting another for religious (often linked with political) beliefs; yet all major religions include the ‘Golden Rule’ – “Do to others as you would have them to do to you”. Even Christians (and let’s be honest, this includes Catholics) have a dubious history when it comes to respecting others’ freedom of belief and worship. I suspect there is something warped about human psyche – a fear & suspicion of the ‘different’, perhaps? One of the nastiest elements in this process is family betrayal - by “parents, brothers, relations and friends”. Even apart from times of persecution, I have seen people cut off by close relatives over religious belief & church membership, so that family contact is lost completely.....an awful outcome.

But Jesus adds one spark of hope in this grim process: “I shall give you an eloquence and a wisdom that none of you opponents will be able to resist or contradict.” Some of the most moving speeches are those given by people condemned to death for their faith. In the best examples, there is no bitterness, rancour or ranting against their persecutors – just acceptance of God’s will, and hope for future reconciliation. That was the spirit Jesus showed on Calvary.

Sadly, there is no escaping the fact that suffering is a problem for religious believers. Whether it be the result of war (I’m now thinking of the Ukrainians facing a freezing winter after the Russians have destroyed much of their electricity and gas systems), or the various natural disasters in the world, the existence of innocent suffering seems to fly in the face of an all-powerful and loving Creator. I wish I had a quick answer to give you here, but I haven’t - nor had Jesus in the gospel. Yes, we can say that wars are the result of bad human choices. Yes, we can argue – along with scientists & evolutionists – that the earth is in a permanent state of flux and change, so that earthquakes, droughts, floods, tsunamis, etc, are bound to happen as part of nature. But human emotion, faced with elderly people blown out of their homes, or children starving to death, will always react with “Why?” and “Who’s responsible?” rather than ask, “What do we do about it?”

The answer to that is that we do everything possible to improve things. But we must still live with the tension that “evil” is inexplicable: Jesus implies that in this Sunday’s gospel. When faced with betrayal and death, all he could do was commend himself to the Father’s will. Afterwards, came resurrection. This Remembrance Day, I suggest that must be our hope too. *Fr Jim Dunne.*