

Homily: 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

This weekend across our country we remember all those who died in war and conflict. As we remember them, we pray that God will grant them eternal rest in His presence, and we also pray for peace in our world, asking the Lord to rid the world of the suffering which always comes with violence. Relatively few of those who actually lived through the Second World War are still with us, but we all live with the benefits of the sacrifices that were made by everyone during those years. How the world has changed since then! Hearing stories of those years reminds us just how rapidly our world moves. In the words of the opening hymn, “Change and decay in all around I see...”

Each of us sees plenty of change in our lives: sometimes in society or on the world stage, but always in our own lives. We meet some people, and we lose touch with others; people are born, others die; we perhaps move to a different place, or change jobs. Life is never the same one year to the next. This can be unsettling, yet there is one constant in our lives, one bedrock who can never be taken from us: Jesus Christ. He never leaves us; He is with us always, as He promised, until the end of time. I cannot tell what my life will be like in 40 years, or even next week; but I do know that Jesus will be with me, and I will always be able to turn to Him, whatever good or bad things happen in my life.

At this time of year, the readings at Mass always point us to the end times. We are reminded that this world, this universe, will one day cease to exist, but the God who made it will live on. And we will live on, sustained in eternity by His love, just as we are sustained by Him in our earthly life. Every generation sees many changes, but Christ has been there at the start of every life and will be there at the end of every life on this earth. He never leaves us.

Today the Lord uses language which we could find troubling. There is to be a “time of distress”; the sun will be darkened, the stars will fall from heaven, and so on. He will come in glory on the clouds and will send His angels to gather His chosen “from the four winds”. We might find it puzzling that He tells us that these things will happen “before this generation has passed away.” What does He mean?

In AD70, only three decades or so after Jesus spoke these words in Jerusalem, the city was destroyed by the Romans. It must have felt like the world was ending. But even before that, some of the Lord’s words had already been partly fulfilled. When He died on the cross, the sun was darkened – an old world was passing away, ready for a new creation to begin when He rose from the dead. A few weeks later, the disciples did see the Lord in great power and glory, riding on the clouds, as He ascended to heaven. And He did send His angels – His messengers – to the ends of the earth to gather His chosen: in other words, He told His Apostles to go out to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations. It’s true that our Lord’s words still await their final fulfilment, but some of the things He speaks of did happen, in one sense, before that generation passed.

Today's readings remind us that one day we will meet the Lord, and we are encouraged to prepare for that meeting each day, by living lives of faith and love. Perhaps these readings also offer us some comfort when life is hard now. Hearing about stars falling from the heavens may seem very far-fetched and distant, but we have a phrase, used in daily life, which describes just this. When something catastrophic happens unexpectedly, we may say that we feel as though the world "is falling in around us" – the same visual imaged used by Jesus today. And what does Jesus say? When this happens, "know that He is near, at the very gates." When the world comes crashing in, He is near: that is His promise. And whilst this imagery may alarm us, we also hear Jesus comparing this moment to a fig tree bursting into new life in spring: it is not a death, it is a rebirth.

That is the whole point of this teaching: God does not bring about a disastrous end to this earth, but instead brings about a new creation, one which is perfect. The "time of distress" is the birth pangs of this new world. Jesus tells us that the sun and moon will lose their brightness, and the stars will fall from the sky; but we also hear in today's first reading that those who live a virtuous life on earth will live beyond this, and will "shine as brightly as the vault of heaven,... *as bright as stars* for all eternity". The Lord is telling us today: "all that gives natural light will fade, but you, who live by my light, will shine for eternity." "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Those who live by His Word will continue to shine, even when the sun itself ceases to exist. Nothing in today's readings should alarm or frighten us. They are filled with promise. But they do call us to live a virtuous life, to prepare well for that time when material things pass away and a new world is born for those who live in the Lord.

Fr Andrew

