

Homilies for the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time:

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Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle B

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

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

As we quickly approach the end of our liturgical year, we recognize that the Church always keeps the life of Jesus as the theme that runs throughout the year. We begin in Advent with his birth. These last few Sundays, marking the end of the year, focus on the discussions Jesus had with his disciples at the very end of his ministry. In a sense, every year we relive the experiences of the apostles; we relive the experience they had of this God-made-man in their very presence. What I am always fascinated by is that as we go over these same stories year after year — if we are open to the wisdom and the truth they contain — we are changed. We are transformed. Part of that is extraordinarily mysterious. Part of that transformation is because we are growing in our understanding of what Jesus has been trying to say all along. This gospel passage from Mark is the beginning of a very important passage. Basically, I want to give you the context of when Jesus was saying these words to his disciples. He had just walked out of the temple for the very last time. He turned around and sat opposite the temple; the disciples were gathered around him. He began to speak to them. What I'd like you to imagine with me in this longest passage from the gospel of Mark (where he is speaking to his disciples) is that he is trying to tell them how he expects them to live their lives, how he expects them to spend the rest of their days.

One of the themes throughout the Scriptures is that this life, this earthly existence, is temporary. Our souls are eternal. God has created us to live forever — but not here, not in this world, not in this particular form that we are in. Ultimately, all the Scriptures seem to point to this mysterious gift that comes at the end where we enter into fullness of life, and we spend time with one another and with our relationships and with this God who has created us. This place we enter into is filled with great wonder and great understanding. One of the themes we see in that place, eternal life, is that the people who are there are filled with great awe and thanksgiving to God for everything he has done. It implies to me that when we get to the other side of this existence we see so much more. All of a sudden, things make sense. Ultimately, we are looking at this source of everything and giving this source great thanks and praise for all that he has done. That would imply to me that so many of the things that are disturbing, bothersome and confusing and hard for us in this world are that way not because they are so difficult and terrible in terms of their nature but rather because we don't see enough. We don't understand enough. This discourse from Jesus asks a number of things of his disciples. This is one way to summarize it, and I find it a very encouraging summary for me personally. It's basically this: Jesus seems to be

looking in the eyes of his disciples after he has finished his work on this earth and he says, “What I really want you to do is to trust me. I want you to trust through this process because it’s not an easy process, and it’s certainly a process that is filled with confusion and darkness, pain and suffering. But here’s what I want you to do: I want you to be alert. I want you to be attentive. I want you to be fully alive. I want you not to be alarmed at what happens, and I certainly never want you to be afraid. What I want is for you to endure.” That, I think, is a good summary of this passage in Mark. In a sense, it is a summary of all the ways Jesus talked about the final times, the end times.

What I’d like to talk about are these end times. What are they like, and what is Jesus preparing us for? We have in the first reading, from the Book of Daniel, one of the first books in the Bible that is considered to be an apocalyptic book. In the New Testament, we end with another book of the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation. The word “apocalypse” means a revelation, particularly a revelation that has to do with what is going to happen ultimately. So it is a revelation about the future. Probably there is nothing more confusing in the Scriptures than the apocalyptic writings. There are many religions for whom these readings are the most important because they work out of an emphasis on the final times. They are often those religions most concerned with reading all the present signs to give us some kind of clear indication that “this is it. The end is now. It’s going to come in about three weeks, four days.” It’s fascinating to me that we have groups of Christians who have listened to the whole Scripture, and yet they come out with this one very, very real focus on “When is it going to end.” If we just knew that, then everything could fall into place, and we could make sure everything was tied up and fixed up. It’s almost like that desire we have sometimes (though not that often!) of knowing when someone is going to die or when we are going to die. Always the Scriptures, Jesus’ teaching, leave us hanging. It’s very clear in all the teachings of the apocalyptic writing that we are not to know the time. In fact, in the reading from Mark, it’s like Jesus doesn’t even know the time. We don’t know the time. Only the Father knows when. What that leaves us with is the clear teaching that we are not to know when, that we are not to use the signs that the reading from Daniel gives us, as a kind of chart to plot out when this end will come. It’s very clear to me that in the writings Jesus does not think that is such a good emphasis. We should not be so much focused on the end, but focused on the process that brings us to the good end, to the right place.

It’s much more important to Jesus how we live in this world rather than when the world ends. We look at these marvelous stories in the Scriptures as ways of enabling us to understand how to live. It is interesting that the apocalyptic writings are filled with images of destruction, darkness, things that would scare us. This is the way I would like you to work through this with me. I’d like you to imagine that fundamentally all of the images found in the apocalyptic writings that have to do with destruction, with darkness, the moon going dark, the stars falling from the sky, the earth shaking, fire, famine — all of these are symbols of the process. They are symbols of the process we have to endure. They should not alarm us. They should not make us afraid. We need to look at them, be attentive, not turn our heads away. We need to pay attention. What are all those images other than what I think is the most difficult thing in life: The suffering that is demanded for transformation. If there is anything in the Scriptures that doesn’t make me want to jump up and scream, “Hurrah, hurrah,” it is the process that Jesus reveals so clearly in his life and teaching. There is only one way to get to the place of real depth, openness and understanding. And that is through suffering. It’s the process that is difficult. Wouldn’t it be interesting if God created a world where everything that is radically pleasurable would involve the things that are the best for us? Isn’t it interesting that so many of the things

that make us immediately feel good are often the things we choose when we are short-sighted, especially if they are the major focus of our lives? Like if we refuse to ever be in situations that are painful, uncomfortable or difficult. Or if we refuse to do anything that is hard on us. Then, we never get to the place where God wants us to be. We never get to the place where we know deep inside of our souls that we need to be.

Work, suffering, and difficulty are part of this process. When I think about the times in my life when I am most dangerous to myself and to the people around me is when I am in an illusion. When I am caught in something I don't think is wrong. Whatever I am doing I'm not even aware of the impact it is having. I think that's probably the most frightening place we can be. But any time I have been comfortable in that place of illusion and unaware of the effect on me and the impact on others and somebody breaks through and gives me an insight or mirrors for me what I am really doing — it is a devastating experience. If I am comfortable in my illusion and my illusion is ripped away from me, it is like the ground has dropped out from underneath me. It is like the lights have all gone out. It's like all darkness. It's terrifying. The same is true of those things that we feel are absolutely most essential — when those things are taken away — it is like the bottom has fallen out. Be it a lover, be it our health, be it our marriage — whatever we lose — if we have focused on that one thing as the one absolute reason for our existence (and I'm exaggerating to make my point) it's devastating. We have no reason to go on. Again, it's like the ground has opened up and swallowed us. It's like the lights have gone out. It strikes me that this is what Jesus is trying to teach us. This is going to be part of the process he expects us to endure.

When Jesus is sitting across from the temple, speaking to his disciples, he recognizes he's been struggling to change the system going on there. He knows that this system, so powerfully represented by the temple, is not going to go through some sort of nice, gentle change where everybody realizes that Jesus is truly the Messiah and we need to focus on something different. No, that whole thing had to be destroyed. It had to be torn apart. Not a stone left upon a stone. The destruction of the temple is a powerful symbol of the way change unfolds. Often we go through periods where we feel that everything is crumbling. Everything seems to be falling apart. Jesus invites us to imagine, in this process of dealing with end times, that this is the process. Ultimately when the end times come for the world there will be that same kind of complete collapse of everything that isn't real, that isn't true, that isn't ultimately eternal. That's why we can talk about the world ultimately being destroyed. I always used to hear these stories and think of all the horror movies I've seen and think, "This is the way it's all going to end." I think that's very oversimplified. I don't think it's necessarily going to end in a great fire that will consume every house on the block. Or a great earthquake where everybody is swallowed up. It's just going to feel like that when we have to let go of everything.

One of the fears that comes over us about final times and illusions being exposed is the fear of judgment. Nestled in between the reading from Daniel and the gospel of Mark is this wonderful passage from the letter to the Hebrews. We are simply told that there is someone who has stepped into history to absorb all of this negativity that our illusions and sins have created. There is someone who is there to say, "I am offering myself in sacrifice for all of these things that are negative," and there is no need for punishment because all is forgiven. That's an extraordinarily freeing statement. It's one thing to suffer through something, to go through a radical change, to have to face reality, to have to let go of our illusions. But to have to go through the pain of letting go of our illusions and to immediately face a judgment that says, "And now I'm condemned because I made all

these mistakes,” is simply too much. To go through that double doorway. One doorway is difficult enough. The doorway that worries about judgment and condemnation has been made easy because of this incredible, forgiving act of this God-made-man who came into the world to absorb all the guilt and shame of the world. It’s not about guilt and shame that we need to be focused on. It’s about simply going through the process that is very difficult and painful that always brings us to a newer place.

I believe that what Jesus ultimately wanted his disciples to do as he was trying to describe how their lives would end and how the world as we know it would end (and the two are often confused) was to realize that what is ultimately happening to them is happening to the world. There’s the very confusing phrase where Jesus says, “All the things I am talking about, all this change and transformation, is going to happen in your generation. No one in this generation is going to die without all of this happening.” It’s clear to me that what is happening to the world is ultimately happening to us. There’s a mirror reflection there. What we go through, the world is going through. As I look at my life and the lives of people around me, I realize that there is a real transformation going on, mostly because of the pain and suffering we endure. That incredible same thing is happening to the world. We are asked to trust through this process and to enable this incredible figure Jesus to sit across from us, much as he did with his disciples at the end of his ministry. At the end of this liturgical year, we are invited to imagine Jesus’ arm on our shoulder or his hand holding ours and really encouraging us. That’s what he really wants to do: To encourage people to go through the process that is absolutely essential. If we worry and wonder about this process, if we think it’s unfair, I think the only thing we can balance that sense of injustice with is a radical trust in a God who would never choose anything for us that wouldn’t be the most perfect choice in the world. If there were a better system, he would have found it. What we are asked to believe is that this is the best system. As we submit to it every day, we submit most especially to the promise that is within it.

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Come to the Party

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

This afternoon I shall avoid today’s Gospel. Not from fear—not even out of ignorance. My problem is, I preached from this pulpit on that Gospel six years ago. Not that I expect you to remember the homily, especially if you weren’t here. Rather, the homily is printed word for word in my collection *Still Proclaiming Your Wonders*,¹ available from the Newman Book Store at a reasonable price. There you have it in a nutshell: all I know about the end of the world, the second coming of Christ, and the gathering of all the elect. End of commercial.

What then? The Gospel of this world’s end suggests a related gospel—a subject we rarely talk about, infrequently preach about: our own end. I mean what will happen to us when we close our eyes in biological death. Three stages to my approach, three questions: (1) Will I really go on living after I die? (2) If I go on living, what sort of life will it be? (3) How make this life come alive in today’s language, contemporary symbols?

I

First question: Will I really go on living after I die? Years ago, in philosophy classes, we spent endless hours trying to prove from sheer reason that your soul and mine never die. The arguments are not without merit, but you need a philosophical mind to appreciate them. Faith-full Christians respond more readily to St. Paul's rousing reaction to some Christians at Corinth who denied resurrection (1 Cor 15:12—19):

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have set our hopes on Christ, we are of all men and women most to be pitied.

A powerful profession of faith. It demands your profound pondering. Meanwhile, allow me to unpack it a bit, phrase it so as to express the Catholic vision in my own words—and this after seven decades that moved from simple acceptance, through agonized questioning and critical re-examination, to my present peace of mind and heart.

First, some background you know full well. Because sin had ruptured man and woman from God, had severed man and woman from one another, had alienated man and woman from the earth on which they walked, had introduced a schizophrenia in each human person,² the Son of God took our flesh.³ God's Son was born of a woman as we are—but laid in a feeding trough for cattle. God's Son grew up as we grow, learning from Mary how to love, from Joseph how to shape a plow—but without any of his neighbors suspecting who he really was. He left home as we leave, to do what his Father had sent him to do: preach repentance and forgiveness, heal the sick and raise the dead—but only for three swift years. He took flak from his own people for consorting with sinners of all sorts, was called crazy by his own kin. He changed bread and wine into his flesh and blood, so that he might be with us even after he died. He let himself be sold for silver by one of his closest friends, condemned on false charges, lashed with whips and crowned with thorns, nailed to twin beams of bloody wood. He died murmuring God's mercy on his enemies, love on all of us.

Why? So that we might live, happily or miserably, for a day or a hundred years, and then disappear into dust? So that uncounted thousands could die of hunger each day, babies be aborted or bombed to bits, good men and women waste away with AIDS, and that would be literally the end of them? So that we might taste what love is like and discover that death is more powerful than love? So that you might eat Christ's flesh, drink his blood, and bam! you're dead? Is this why God's own Son walked our earth and died for us, rose glorious from the grave and returned to his Father? If that were all, Christ's cross would be sheer tragedy; he might as well have stayed at home!

No, good friends. Not only does it fail to make sense, human or divine; it contradicts the very words of Christ. Why did he take our flesh? "I came that [you] may have life, and have it in abundance" (Jn 10:10). Why the Eucharist? Whoever "eats of this bread will live for ever" (Jn 6:51). Why did he die? "The Son of man must be lifted up [on the cross], that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:14—15). He conquered death

not for himself but for you and me; when he ascended to his Father, he returned home with us.

My first point is summed up in a single verse in John, a verse Martin Luther called "the gospel in miniature": "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). That's the core of Christian faith. If it hasn't yet "grabbed" you, don't leave; just pray: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk 9:24).

II

Second question: What sort of life will that afterlife be? In my childhood we grew up entranced by heaven, consoled by purgatory, scared green by hell. All sorts of images were fixed in our imaginations, from endless fun with angels to unquenchable fire amid pitch-forking devils.

To be realistic and Christian, you must begin with an admission of ignorance. We cannot really grasp what heaven is like, what we shall be like hereafter. The First Letter of John is clear on that: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 Jn 3:2). Thrilling indeed, but not very revealing. We do not know how God will "look" to us, what a soul is like outside the body, what our risen bodies will be like. I know I shall still be I, only (thank God) without the warts.

What do we know about heaven? For your information, heaven is *not* an unrelieved, eternal yuk. "Bor...ing!" Heaven is a word, a less than thrilling word, for life. Heaven is being alive as you have never lived before. Alive with the kind of life God lives. Can you remember a moment when you felt so gloriously alive that you could scarcely stand it? Whatever it was—folding your first-born in your arms or scoring your first TD, total oneness with one other or a foaming mug of Michelob, molding a perfect figurine or shaping a brilliant idea, aware of Christ in the Eucharist or feeling him in your bones—whatever made you tremble with unrestrained excitement, multiply that to the nth degree and you will touch ever so lightly the joy that is life without end.

The problem is, we are still left to our imaginations; we've never experienced anything actually like it. St. Paul said we would "see face to face" (1 Cor 13:12); but the Trinity has no face. Mary Magdalene mistook the risen Christ for the gardener. What is beyond doubting is this: God will be there, no longer a hidden God, but ...as ...God ... is. Father, Son, and Spirit. And with God all who have loved God with all their hearts: patriarchs like Abraham, prophets like Isaiah, remarkable women like Ruth and the mother of Jesus, Augustine and Aquinas, Thomas More and Thomas Merton, Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux, your own mothers and fathers, your dearest friends. You've never seen a party like that one—and the party never ends.

Hell? We know even less about hell than about heaven. But three facts I must fix in your minds. (1) There is no proof that anyone is actually in hell. Perhaps some Jesuits are there, paying for crimes against the laity; but no proof. Don't take too seriously the *New Yorker* cartoon: Satan overlooking hordes of humans in hell and observing to one of his minions: "We do pretty well when you stop to think that people are basically good." (2) Hell-fire is an image—but don't get uptight about a combustion process with oxygen. Hell's deepest meaning is anguish, agony, sorrow, sadness. What sort of anguish? A fate far worse than

fire: total frustration, endless alienation. My whole being cries out for God, and God is out of reach, for ever. There is no point in living, but live I must, unendingly. Fancifully, it's as if an eye knew that it could never see; an ear, that it could never hear; a withered hand, that it could never touch. Made for God, I am literally Godless. Made for love, I am literally loveless. Made for union, I am alone—days without end. (3) For your consolation, no one will ever be without God for ever unless he or she wants to be. C. S. Lewis expressed it as well as anyone: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"4

Purgatory? I'll settle for it. It simply means that some of us, perhaps most of us, sinners that we are, may have to wait a bit before we "see" God; we're not really ready. But don't spend your Miller time trying to figure out what it's like. Simply, God will be preparing you for...life, for perfect joy. And you'll be at once happy and unhappy. Happy because you know you *will* enjoy God; unhappy because you have to wait, because you are restless for the Love that is all you want in life.

III

Third question: How make this afterlife come alive in today's language, contemporary symbols? Perhaps a story I read recently will help.

One day a saint was visited by an angel who asked her if she wished to see heaven and hell. She said yes and was immediately transported to hell. It was not at all what she had expected.

It was a beautiful place with many mansions. But then she heard terrible sounds of agony and pain. She followed her ears and found herself in a huge banquet hall. The tables were filled with delicious food, and all the residents of hell were seated at the tables.

They all looked normal except for one very important difference. They had long arms, maybe five feet in length. At the end of each arm, in their hands, were forks. But they could not get the food to their mouths because no one had an elbow. They howled with hunger before a banquet of food.

Next she was transported to heaven. It was not what she expected.

It was a beautiful place of many mansions—exactly like hell. But soon she heard sounds of rejoicing. She followed her ears and came to a huge banquet hall. The tables were filled with delicious food, and all the residents of heaven were seated at the tables.

The people were shaped exactly like the residents of hell—long arms and no elbows—but this fact caused them no difficulty. They simply loaded their forks with food and reached across the table to feed a friend. Everyone was fed.⁵

Good friends, that story is symbolic; it has a particular pertinence for your life and mine here and now. You see, God is ceaselessly inviting us to love. "When [we] ... respond by feeding one another, [we] begin the banquet of heaven."⁶ Heaven begins this side of the grave. You've heard it from the lips of Christ: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and

you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (Mt 25:35—36). What then? "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you..." (v. 34). Come to the party. But the party begins now, feeding your sisters and brothers now, welcoming the stranger now, clothing the naked now, visiting the sick and the imprisoned now. R.S.V.P.

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With Great Power and Glory

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

When I spoke to you one month ago on camels and needles,¹ I did not suspect that a still more difficult Gospel would waylay us in November. The end of the world, the second coming of Christ, the gathering of all the elect—perhaps what you need is not a fifteen minute homily but a six-credit course in the New Testament. It's true, the Church wants not exegesis but proclamation, not the solution to puzzles but a retelling of God's wonderful works among His people, not study but praise. The problem is, my proclamation and your praise should leap out of God's word—and today's word is mysterious, provocative, overpowering.

What to do? I suggest that, as so often, three elements enter into your assembly here today: the liturgy of the Church, the word of God, and the needs of the people. So, why don't we have a go at each in order: (1) what the Church is ritualizing in today's liturgy; (2) what the Gospel is describing; (3) how liturgy and Gospel might touch our human and Christian concerns.

I

First then, the Church's liturgy. What are we doing here each time we gather? What are we doing this morning? The difficulty is, we are such different people that we see different things even in the liturgy. Someone compared it to the story of four blind men experiencing an elephant. One said it was a very large tree; he had put his arms around the elephant's leg. No, said the second, it's a snake with a very coarse skin and a strange, soft mouth; he had grasped the trunk. The third swore it was a sail on a ship; he had felt the elephant's ear. The fourth insisted it was a piece of old rope; he had grabbed the elephant's tail.²

For most of us, the Mass is what we see or would like to see, what we experience or would like to experience. An ageless Latin or an ephemeral English, Bach or the St. Louis Jesuits, a mystery-laden quiet or hyperthyroid activity, personal communion with Jesus or a community reach-out—and so on and so forth. For all their importance, these can be blind spots; they can keep us from seeing more deeply into the mystery we all cherish. In the liturgy we celebrate the ceaseless work of redemption; we proclaim God's wonderful works in the history of salvation. We don't just read about them, we don't just remember them; we re-present them, make them effectively present in us and in our lives.

In all this a major element is God's word. Year after year, repeatedly and endlessly, the readings recapture the movement of our salvation. Last Advent we re-presented the

world's waiting for its Savior, a waiting readied through Isaiah and the Baptist and Mary of Nazareth. We welcomed the Lord Jesus as he came to us surprisingly in the flesh of an infant. We grew to manhood with him in a tiny Jewish town, walked in his steps through Galilee and Judea, recaptured his dying-rising through Lent and Easter. His ascension lifted all of us with him to the Father; his Spirit descended not only on the disciples but on each believer. And since Pentecost we have heard and lived the mission of the Church, its ups and downs, its pride and its passion, its agony and its ecstasy, its ceaseless struggle to grow into the fulness of its Lord, its living in hope for the final coming of its Savior.

And now, now we reach the end of the liturgical year. Next week the peak: We will crown Christ king. There the liturgy ritualizes what will be the high point of creation, when humankind and all it possesses, "the whole creation" that "has been groaning in travail together until now" (Rom 8:22), even death itself, will be subjected to Christ, "when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1 Cor 15:24). Today we celebrate the beginning of that end; today we live in anticipation the end of the world as we know it. If Advent was prologue to the Christian mystery, these two weeks are epilogue. We round out the history of salvation; we peer nearsightedly into its ending.

II

Second, the word of God. What is the Gospel describing? In brief, three interrelated realities: the end of this world as we know it; the coming of Christ, this time not in infant helplessness but "with great power and glory" (Mk 13:26); and the assembling into one place of all who are saved.

There is a danger here. In each of these three powerful prophecies you can be seduced by the images, distracted by the description. The language to which you have listened is the language of "apocalyptic." A big word, I know. Simply, apocalyptic was a special style of writing. The writers, seeing in vision the final struggle to establish God's kingdom, used incredibly vivid images, all sorts of symbols, to convey realities beyond their experience. If you have read the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, you know what I am saying: seven angels with trumpets, a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, the King of kings in blood-red robe on a white horse, Satan sealed in a pit for a thousand years, the new Jerusalem built of every glorious jewel—and so much more. The images are important, for they suggest the reality; but they are not to be taken with wooden literalism, extreme realism.

So here, in today's Gospel. There is some science-fiction—more fiction than science: sun and moon refusing to shine, stars falling from heaven's vault. This is first-century cosmology. There are fascinating images; but do not expect to see the Lord riding a gigantic pink cloud. And be not disappointed if you do not spy real angels flying like supermen from the rock-ribbed coasts of Maine to the sunny shores of L.A., gathering countless Christians beneath their wings and winging them to some giant superdome in the sky.

On the other hand, the Gospel *reality* is not fiction, is not an image. The fact is, this world, the sort of existence we know, this world of war and human wisdom, of sin and self-giving, of laughter mingled with tears, of skyscrapers and computers, of hunger and plenty—this world will come to an end. And with it will close the story of salvation here below, God's magnificent plan, from Adam through Christ to Antichrist, to bring all men and women to Him in endless joy.

All this, the Gospel insists, will end. It will end because it will be time, God's good time, for Jesus to come in "power and glory." Here Mark paints only one side of the picture: The elect are gathered into Christ's kingdom. It is a consoling prophecy, perhaps because Mark is writing for a community under persecution.³ He does not include what Matthew has: The angels "will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire" (Mt 13:41—42). For Mark, Jesus does not come as judge; he comes as savior. He does not deny that the sheep and the goats will have different pens; for pastoral reasons, he is simply not interested in the lost, only in the elect.

III

Third, the needs of the people. How might today's liturgy and Gospel touch our human and Christian concerns? To begin with, there are two concerns we can only be curious about: When will the world end, and how? Is the last day tomorrow or thousands of years away? Will it all end in ice or in fire, from God's doing or our own madness? Despite the prophets of doom and the TV preachers, we simply do not know. Remember what Jesus himself said: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, and not even the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13:32). Today the Son knows; but we—we would do well to confess our ignorance. In that sense at least, we can be like angels!

But such ignorance should not immobilize us, leave us impotent. Whenever and however the world will end, the second coming of Jesus is our ceaseless hope. Does that sound strange? It ought not. Without his second coming his first makes little sense. That original Christmas still takes our breath away—every year. We never tire of celebrating it: our Savior in straw. But it is only an *apéritif*, a stimulant, *Dubonnet*; it should make us hungry, make us yearn for more. For Christ on a cloud? It may not grab us, but the only unreal thing there is the cloud. *This* is why he came powerless, why he cried aloud ingloriously in a garden and on a cross, why he rose from the rock and returned to his Father: so that at last he might come "with great power and glory" and lift all his elect into the Father's presence forever.

Since that is so, let us affirm Christ's final coming with the intensity of the early Christians who expected him to return in their lifetime. After the Consecration let us proclaim with uncommon conviction what we confess to be the mystery of our faith: "Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!"

But if Christ's coming "with great power and glory" is mostly a matter of Christian hope, if it may well be a millennium or more away, if I can do nothing to hasten or delay it, isn't it quite irrelevant to my day-to-day existence? On this I like what a fine Episcopalian New Testament scholar has written: "Christian faith always lives 'as if' the second coming were just around the corner..."⁴ As if...Not pure fantasy, not imagination run wild. If you are convinced that "Christ will come again," that the final moment is the moment to which all of history, including your own, is marching, that this is the climax of Christian yearning, then you will live in its light. You will become now what you want to be then.

How do you assure that? The significant single word here is the command of Jesus at the end of this chapter in Mark: "Watch!" (Mk 13:35, 37). Be on the alert! Keep your eyes open!

Watch for what? On the alert for what? Eyes open for what? For the constant coming of

Christ into your life. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to say that the question of religion is not what we do with our solitude; the question of religion is what we do with the presence of God. A Christian might rephrase it: What do I do with the presence of Christ? He comes to you ceaselessly: each time you come together; each time his word is proclaimed to you; each time his body rests in your hand or on your tongue. Christ comes to you in each man, woman, and child whose eyes meet yours—especially those who hunger for food or justice or love. We should never grow weary of the words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel:

When the Son of man comes in his glory...[he] will say to those at his right hand: "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him: "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the King will answer them: "Truly, I say to you, in so far as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."
(Mt 25:31—40)

My brothers and sisters: It is good indeed to fix our eyes on Christ's final coming "with great power and glory." Here, after all, is our Christian hope. But it would be tragic if the far horizon blinded us to Christ's daily coming in rags and tatters, lonely, frightened, joyless, sick in so many ways, lost in a strange world that does not seem to care. Here, after all, is our Christian love.

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