

The Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wisdom 11:22-12:2
<i>Response</i>	I will extol thee, my God and King, and bless thy name for ever and ever.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13, 14
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 19:1-10

The 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C takes us into Paul's Second Letter to the church at Thessalonica, commonly referred to as Second Thessalonians. This letter is a... It's a very short letter, but it's a very powerful letter and it's very much focused on what theologians refer to as eschatology. That is the doctrine of the last things or the doctrine of the end, in Greek, the eschaton. So if you've ever wondered, what did Paul teach about the end of time, First Thessalonians and Second Thessalonians are really important letters for understanding the eschatology of St. Paul, his teaching on the second coming of Christ and in Second Thessalonians in particular, his teaching about the eschatological tribulation, this time of suffering and deception, and sin frankly, that will take place before the second coming of Jesus. So in the reading for today, given that eschatological focus to Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, it's not unsurprising that the passage is focused on the *parousia* of Jesus.

Parousia is a Greek word that means coming or presence. And in this selection the Church gives us for today, Paul is talking to the Thessalonians about the *parousia* of Christ, about the... What we would call the second coming or the final advent of Christ. So the passage begins in Second Thessalonians 1:11-2:2. It's a short passage but it's a helpful, one, because it kind of gives you a window into the problem, the main question that apparently generated the composition of this letter to the church at Thessalonica. Namely, there were some false teachings about the *parousia*, about the second coming of Christ that were circulating among the Thessalonians. And so Paul writes this second letter, this short letter, to correct those false teachings and

clarify what the Thessalonians should actually believe about the final coming of Christ. So with that in mind about the general introduction of the context, let's listen to the Church's words that she gives us today. Second Thessalonians 1:11:

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his call, and may fulfil every good resolve and work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Now concerning the coming¹

And the Greek word there is *parousia*.

of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Now the reading stops there, but I'm just going to go on a little bit further so that you have a little bit clearer contextual understanding of what Paul is saying about the eschaton. Listen to the next few verses. This is verse three and following. He says:

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first...

The Greek word there is apostasy, the great apostasy.

and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this?

So just pause there. Paul's going to go on in a lengthy description of this so-called man of lawlessness, which people will often refer to as the antichrist, although Paul doesn't use that language to refer to him here. That's from the letters of John in the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Catholic epistles that you find the letter of antichrist. But what Paul is saying here is that the *parousia* is not going to take place. The second coming of Jesus is not going to take place unless two things happen first. One, the great apostasy or falling away from the faith, or rebellion is the way the RSV translates it. And the coming of the man of lawlessness, or as Paul calls him, the son of damnation, son of perdition, right. Who is not only going to oppose God, but will actually proclaim himself to be God. This is one of the claims, again, frequently associated in the Christian tradition with the figure of the antichrist, of the final one who opposes Christ in the church that will come in the end times.

Now you kind of wish that the lectionary would've included those verses there because they're really fascinating and interesting. And I have a series that I deal with it called Jesus and the End Times: A Catholic View of the Last Days. I'll take you through all this material in more detail if you'd like to look into that and dive into depth about...what about eschatological tribulation and the antichrist? What does the Church teach about that officially in the Catechism of the Catholic Church for example, or in other documents? And that's a topic that we don't have time for because I wrote my dissertation on that, so I could go on and on and on and on. But let's just go back and we'll walk through step by step what the Church has given us for today to read.

Okay, so the first point here, notice here that Paul begins by praying for the Thessalonians that God might make them worthy of His call. So it's interesting here, what you see is the language of a vocation. So he begins by telling the Thessalonians, I want God to make you worthy, literally, of your vocation. Now I've mentioned this in other videos, but I'll say it again, that when Paul talks about the language of being called by God or having a vocation from God, he doesn't mean...as a rule, he doesn't mean a particular vocation to a state of life, like virginity or to the ministry in the Church through ordination to the presbyterate or episcopate or something like that. He actually tends to use it ordinarily to refer to the baptismal call, right? The call to be in Christ, the call to be holy and to be part of Christ's mystical body. You can see this in 1 Corinthians 7, when Paul uses the same terminology from 2 Thessalonians. 1 Corinthians 7:18, he says:

Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was any one at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.

So here Paul's talking about the vocation to be a believer in Christ through baptism. And so what he's saying is, if you were circumcised when you were baptized, then just stay circumcised. And if you were uncircumcised when you were baptized, then stay uncircumcised, right? So Paul's idea there is what we nowadays talk about as the universal call to holiness, meaning the call to become a *hagios*, a holy one in Christ. So Paul begins the reading for today, just telling the Thessalonians he's praying for them, he's praying for them to be made worthy of the vocation to holiness that they received in their baptism. And he also prays that God would fulfill every good resolve and every work of faith by his power so that the name of Jesus might be glorified in them.

So here's a second aspect of the reading, it's interesting. Paul isn't just interested in this personal salvation of the Thessalonians, in his readers in general. He's also interested that the name of Jesus would be glorified through them. This is something I think is a very interesting corrective to at least what I think of as a contemporary Christian emphasis. Like in contemporary Christianity, there... Well, not in every circle, there's a lot of emphasis on personal salvation, right? I want to be saved, and that's good because that's something we should want to be. But we tend to underemphasize that it's not only about our personal salvation, it's about our sanctification, our vocation, like I just mentioned, giving glory to Jesus Christ through the public witness of holiness that we live out in our lives.

So Paul here is making both points to the Thessalonians. He doesn't just want them to be worthy of the call to holiness that they receive in baptism. He also wants them to be worthy of it so that through them the name of Jesus Christ might be glorified and more people might come to Christ and Christ might be praised, because remember, Paul's writing to the church in Thessalonica, it's a small community in a predominantly pagan, gentile context, right? So the church is starting off very small here. So the witness of believers is extremely important. Their holiness is going to be the way that other people come to leave behind the cults of Aphrodite or other gods and goddesses of the Greek world and become believers in Jesus Christ, Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah. So a second aspect there is interesting, that the name of Jesus might be glorified through and in the Thessalonians according to the grace given to them in Christ.

Now those are kind of preliminary points. What I would suggest is the heart of the reading for today and really the heart of the Second Letter to Thessalonians is the issue of the *parousia*, the issue of the coming of Christ. So here Paul says:

concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him...

That's interesting. It's not just about Jesus coming back, it's about the gathering of the saints to meet Jesus, to meet the risen Christ. This is an allusion to something he talks about in First Thessalonians. So in another video we look at First Thessalonians 4, where Paul talks about being caught up together in the clouds and going out to meet Christ along with those who come with him. So the idea here is that the second coming isn't just a return of Jesus, it's also an ecclesiological event. It's a gathering of all of the holy ones, both those who are asleep in Christ, right? Who've already died, as well as those who are alive at the time of the parousia to meet the Lord. So here Paul is, in a sense, picking up the thread of a topic that he's already addressed in the First Letter to Thessalonians about the parousia and the ingathering of the believers in Christ, at the second coming. He's picking up on that same thread, that same topic, but begging the Thessalonians not to be upset:

not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

What's Paul describing here? Pause here for just a second and notice that the RSV, when we're reading that verse, has "to the effect that the day of the Lord has come", but the Greek word there is ambiguous and some translations will say "to the effect that the day of the Lord is at hand", right? So the word is ambiguous. You could take it either to mean that some people in Thessalonica are saying that the end time has already taken place, right? Or some people saying that the end time is at hand, meaning it's imminent, it's happening tomorrow, it's happening next week or next month. I incline to the former view in part because elsewhere in the Pauline letters, like in Second Thessalonians... Not Second Thessalonians, Second Timothy 2:18, Paul says that in an unambiguous and explicit way, for example, if you look at Second Timothy 2, he talks about the errors of two figures named Hymenaeus and Philetus. And this is the problem, in verse 18, he says:

[they] have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already.

Or is already passed. In other words, that it's already happened. So I'm going to take that second view because I find it a little more persuasive and I'm going to talk

in that way about it, but you should be aware that there's two competing interpretations of exactly how to understand Paul's words. Either way, whether he's saying that the people are saying that the day of the Lord has already happened or that it's going to happen tomorrow, it's at hand, either way, Paul's trying to correct the error by pointing out that no, actually there are some eschatological events that have to happen first before that will take place. Reading Paul's letters can kind of be like listening to one side of a telephone call, right? You have to infer from the words that you hear what the conversation is about and try to figure out what the situation he's describing is. And so the most plausible reading of this and what most people think is that apparently in the wake of Paul writing First Thessalonians, where he talked about the parousia and the second coming and the resurrection of the dead at the end of time, somebody has gotten in and either given a prophecy by... That's what he means by spirit or by word. Someone has gotten up and spoken a prophecy, or they've received a forged letter. Somebody has written a letter in the name of Paul claiming, in effect, that the parousia of Christ, second coming that he discussed in First Thessalonians has already happened. It's already happened.

And so Paul is correcting what scholars have referred to as an—sorry for the technical language, but this is what you get—an overly realized eschatology. What does that mean? Well, remember, eschatology is the doctrine of the end or the last things. And sometimes scholars will talk about future eschatology. In other words, that's focused on end times events that are yet to happen. They're going to happen in the future. Realized eschatology emphasizes the fact that certain end time events have already happened. They've already been realized. Exhibit A, the best example of this, is the resurrection of Christ himself, right? So in Jewish eschatology, beliefs about the end of time, the bodily resurrection of the dead is something that was supposed to happen to everyone at the end of time. Like in the book of Daniel 12, when all the holy ones, the righteous ones are raised up in their bodies, in the age to come. But what happened to Christ is different in the sense that the bodily resurrection that Jews were expecting to happen to everyone at the end of time, happened to one person in the middle of time, namely Jesus Christ. So there is a sense in which the end of time has already begun in the person of Jesus, in the body of Jesus, right? Like Paul will say elsewhere in First Corinthians, he's the first fruits of the resurrection, right? So he's the first little blossom, he's the first blueberry on the blueberry bush, the first orange on the orange tree that has born fruit. And they're going to be more, but they're going to come later. Okay?

So some people are apparently saying that because Christ has already been raised, the end has already come. And by implication you... He doesn't say this, but you

could infer from that that maybe some people are saying there's not going to be any second coming, right? You don't have to wait for that anymore, it's already happened. And what's fascinating about this line here too is that apparently there were already people beginning to, or at least entertain the possibility of, forging letters in the names of apostles. So we know that this happens in the second century, in the third century, in the fourth century, with a number of documents that are commonly known as the Apocrypha or the hidden books. They're more properly titled the pseudepigrapha, false writings, because they are books like the Gospel of Thomas or the Apocalypse of Peter or the Acts of John that are assigned to or associated with apostles, but weren't actually published by them or written by them because they were published 100 years, 200 years, 300 years after the apostles were already dead, right? And as hard as... I've made the joke before, but as hard as it is to write when you're alive, it's even harder to write books when you're dead. So the very fact that they didn't emerge until much later than the apostolic period proves that they were false writings, pseudepigrapha, or what we would call a forged document.

So apparently Paul was already entertaining the possibility it may have already happened, that someone composed a document either claiming his authority or in his name, a letter saying that the parousia had already happened. And Paul said if someone told you that, and if someone wrote a letter in my name, or if someone just spoke a prophecy through the spirit, know that in either case, they're false. And you are:

not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Because I say to you, and that's why the next verses, I read them to you at the beginning, that that day, meaning the final day, the day of judgment, the day of the second coming is not going to happen until some preliminary events take place first. And the two main preliminary events that Paul refers to are the outbreak of the rebellion or the *apostasia*, the apostasy, a great falling away from belief, and then the coming of the anti-Christ, is what John calls it, or the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition is what Paul calls him. This figure who not only opposes God during this tribulation but also claims to be God. Where does Paul get these crazy ideas? I mean, that might be what you're wondering, right? Where does he get these bizarre ideas about the tribulation, about the son of perdition, which by the way, the Gospel of John, that's the name Jesus gives to Judas, he calls him... He says none of them were lost except the son of perdition.

So the antichrist figure in later tradition will become known as a kind of Judas figure, a person who is inside the Church but who betrays Christ and the Church. Alright, so where does Paul get these ideas? He gets them from Jesus, of course. So if you go back to the famous eschatological discourse of Jesus, sometimes called the Olivet Discourse, because he gives on the Mount of Olives. In Matthew 24 and Mark 13, in particular, you'll see that Jesus himself warns the disciples about the fact that there is going to be tribulation before the final coming of the son of man on the clouds to judge the living and the dead, and that there are going to be false christs or false messiahs who will rise up and make claims about themselves. But those claims are going to be false, they're not going to actually be the Messiah.

So I'll just read a quick passage to you just so you understand the context of what Paul's getting at here because Jesus had to warn the disciples about the same thing. Once you see wars and rumors of wars and tribulation and suffering breaking out, the end is not yet, because other things have to happen first. So I'll go to Matthew 24 for example. Matthew 24:3:

As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming

Parousia, same word Paul uses

and of the close of the age?" And Jesus answered them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed

Almost very similar language in Paul, don't be shaken in mind, right? Don't be upset, don't be troubled.

for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the sufferings [birth pangs].

This is false labor, early labor, whatever they call it these days. It's not delivery time yet, the baby hasn't yet come, but the pain is starting to come in waves, so to speak, is the image he's using there. And then he goes on to give a whole prophecy

there that I'm not going to go through. But the point is... You can read that in Matthew 24 if you want to look at Jesus' prophecy of the tribulation. The point here is that it will ultimately climax in the coming of the son of man on the clouds of heaven. And he will gather his elect from the four winds in Matthew 24:29 and following. And he's very clear at the end of that discourse that no one knows the day or hour that that's going to happen. So don't let anyone tell you that they know the day or hour because if they do, they're contradicting Jesus himself. And you see a similar warning in Paul's second letter. He's telling the that Thessalonians, listen, if someone tells you it's already happened, don't believe them. Because there are certain things that have to happen first.

So when we combine, in closing, Paul's teaching in Second Thessalonians with his teaching in First Thessalonians, what you discover is a very nuanced eschatology, but one that is directly in line with the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels. In the Gospels, Jesus says, no one knows the exact day or hour of the *parousia*, but certain things are going to have to happen first. You're going to have to have a tribulation, you're going to have to have false Christs, false messiahs, they'll rise up, okay? There will be wars and all those things. So there's both a preliminary series of events and then a final unknown day or hour, same thing's true in Paul's letters, but it's in reverse. In First Thessalonians 5 he emphasizes it's going to be like a thief in the night, you're not going to be ready. So beware, be ready for it to come. And then he has to come around in Second Thessalonians and clarify that although it is imminent and although it is unknown exactly when it will happen, that doesn't mean it's already happened because there are a few events that haven't taken place that have to happen first, namely the tribulation and the coming of the man of lawlessness.

So what about the living tradition? In closing, just a little quote from Saint Augustine on this because he gives us great wisdom for the ages. This might seem archaic or might seem somewhat esoteric, right? Something that... Is this of any relevance today? But all you need to do is go to the bookstore, which of course, I do frequently, and check out the books in the religion section. You'll see that the speculation about the end times is still very much a vibrant part of contemporary Christian discourse, as it should be in the sense that we should be studying what the scriptures and the tradition tell us about it. At the same time, speculation in the sense of prognostication or predicting exactly when it will happen is always fraught with danger. And so Augustine, =way back in the fifth century, gives some good advice for people about this issue when he says the following:

Those to whom the apostle said, “Be not easily moved from your mind as if the day of the Lord were at hand,” evidently loved the Lord’s coming. The purpose of the doctor of the Gentiles in saying this was not to break them away from the love which burned in them.

So, pause, he's saying they loved the coming of Jesus, they want him to come back and they should. We all should. We should long for the *parousia* of Christ. If you don't long for the *parousia* and for the second coming of Christ, then you either don't believe it or you just haven't taken time to think about what it really means for you, for the Church, and for the cosmos, for the world. Augustine continues:

Rather, he did not want them to put their faith in those from whom they heard that the day of the Lord was at hand, lest, perhaps, when the time had passed when they thought he would come and they realized that he had not come, they might think that the other promises made to them were also false and might despair of the mercy of the faith itself. Therefore, it is not the one who asserts that he is near nor the one who asserts that he is not near who lives the coming of the Lord but the one who rightly waits for him, whether he be near or far, with sincere faith, firm hope, and ardent love [charity].²

So notice what Augustine says, "Be careful. You start listening to people who are giving predictions about when the end has come or if it's already come. And then when you see that the things that are supposed to happen haven't happened, you might lose your faith." And that happens every day to people who fall prey to preachers and prognosticators who start setting a date for the second coming of Christ or making claims about the second coming that are at odds with scripture and tradition. I probably told the story before, there's a famous book that came out in the eighties, I think it was called 88 Reasons That the World Will End in 1988. And of course, 1988 comes and goes and the author writes a second book, 89 Reasons that the World Will End in 1989, which didn't sell as well as the first edition for obvious reasons, but it generated a lot of eschatological fervor that fell flat when the prediction didn't happen because he didn't heed the words of Christ in the Olivet Discourse. And that's happened over and over again. A lot of people, I'm sure, lost their faith or were scandalized or walked away from the faith. So Paul's advice, which is Augustine's advice, is good advice for us today. On the one hand, we need to love the *parousia*. Augustine says that really clearly. If you don't, there's really a problem. There's a hole, so there's a missing part of faith and your hope, which should be for the second coming. I mean we profess it in the creed.

² Augustine, *Letters* 199.4.15; trans. Sr. Wilfrid Parsons.

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. We should be waiting for it with eager anticipation. At the same time, we need to not be anxious about it or fall prey to people who set dates for it because those can be causes of scandal. Our position is to be whether the Lord is near or far, as Augustine says, that we be ready and waiting for him with faith and hope and charity.