

The Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Daniel 12:1-3
<i>Response</i>	You are my inheritance, O Lord!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 16:5, 8, 9-10, 11
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 10:11-14, 18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to stand before the Son of Man.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 13:24-32

The Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time takes us into the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Mark, which is one of the most complicated, most difficult, but also one of my favorite chapters because it's the chapter that I wrote my doctoral dissertation on. The dissertation was two volumes and 705 pages, if I'm not mistaken, and it didn't actually cover all of chapter 13. So needless to say, in this video I'm going to be a little hard pressed to keep it short and keep it brief. There's a lot that I'd like to say but do not have the time to say because were focusing on Jesus' teachings about the end of time and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. This is his famous discourse on the Mount of Olives, sometimes called the Olivet Discourse.

So before I read the gospel text today, which is just a brief clip, it's just a brief passage cut out of the end of the text, I want to just give you a little context before we read it by saying two points. First, when we look at Mark 13 as a whole, the discourse on the Mount of Olives is really about two distinct but related events. So the setting is the disciples asking Jesus about the Temple, right, and he responds to them by describing both the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, that would happen in 70 A.D., but he also talks about the final coming of the Son of Man at the end of time, at the end of the world, when heaven and earth pass away. So whenever you're looking at Mark 13, whenever you're studying Jesus' words on the Mount of Olives, the Olivet Discourse, it's really important to remember he's answering two questions: when will the Temple be destroyed and when will you come in glory to judge the living and the dead. So those two questions are under-

girding the entire chapter, and the reason that is the case is because in the Jewish mindset the Temple itself was a kind of microcosm of the whole universe, it was like a little universe. So if the Temple were to be destroyed it would be a kind of visible representation of what would happen to the universe at the end of time. So it's understandable in a Jewish setting that they would go together.

Unfortunately for us today the way the lectionary picks the verses at the end of the chapter it kind of cuts out the context and gives you both of those events, some things Jesus says about the Temple destruction and some things he says about the end of time, kind of lumped together. So it can be a little tricky to distinguish the two events. So what I'm going to do is I'm just going to read the passage and then I will highlight for you which aspects of it refer to the Temple destruction and which aspects refer to the end of the world, and if you want more on that you can read my dissertation. So that's my little book recommendation. Which I think it...never mind I'm not going to get into that, I think it costs like \$145 because it was printed in Germany, it's a long story. In any case, so if you look at Mark 13, we'll look at the reading for today. The gospel is from verses 24 to 32:

"But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."¹

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.

Okay, pause there. This gospel is particularly challenging for me to encapsulate into a single video for a couple reasons. First, what the church is giving us here is a clip from the end of a very long discourse of Jesus on the Mount of Olives, right. I wrote an entire dissertation on this that was about 700 pages walking through Mark 13:1 almost through the end of Jesus' predictions about the destruction of the Temple, the coming of the tribulation, false Messiahs, false prophets, the abomination of desolation, and then the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven and the passing away of heaven and Earth. The reason the book was so long is because it is a very complex and complicated prophecy of Jesus. So what I want to try to do in this video is just kind of sum up for you a couple of main points. I can't demonstrate them to you but I hope you just kind of take my word for it and just hopefully it will help open up the gospel text for you. In a nutshell, in order to understand the discourse of Jesus on the Mount of Olives you need to understand one main point. Namely this, that when Jesus is speaking in this chapter, Mark 13, he's referring to two distinct but related events. He's talking about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem that the apostles ask him about at the beginning of the chapter, and he's also talking about the end of the world and the final judgment, which they also ask him about at the beginning of the chapter.

Now these two events are distinct but they're related to one another because the Jews would've seen the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem as an event having cosmic significance, because the Temple in Jerusalem was actually constructed according to the universe. It was literally a microcosm, a little universe, with the Temple itself representing the Earth, the Bronze Sea representing the ocean, the inside of the Temple was depicted like the heavens. So on the curtain outside the Temple they had the zodiac, like all the stars in the sky, so that for the Temple to be destroyed was kind about a symbolic destruction of the universe itself. So when Jesus answers their question about when the Temple would be destroyed he also moves right into the question of when heaven and Earth will be destroyed, when the end of the world is going to come, but he makes a difference, a distinction, between the two events at the end of the discourse. One of them he ties to something that's going to happen within one generation, namely the destruction of the Temple and the overthrow of Jerusalem; the other though he says we don't know when it's going to happen, no one knows, not even the Son, but only the Father knows. So as you're reading through the Gospel of Mark 13 it's really important to try to make a distinction wherever possible, and there's some debate about when he's talking

about one and when he's talking about the other, whether he's referring to the destruction of the Temple or whether he's just referring to the end of the world.

So what I'm going to do here in this overview is just look at these last couple of verses the lectionary gives us and try to show you where I think he's talking about which event and why I think that. So we'll just begin in verse 24. Jesus says, "In those days after that tribulation," pause, right there. Okay, what tribulation is he talking about? Well he's referring here to the preceding verses where he described wars breaking out, and rumors of wars, and a desecration of the Temple and needing to flee from Jerusalem and get out of the city, right, and go to the hills. All those things clearly refer to the wars that led up to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. For one thing, it doesn't make any sense for Jesus to tell you to flee to the hills if it's the end of the world because if the world is going down, getting to the hills outside of Judea is not going to help you. But if it's the Temple being destroyed in a war then of course that makes lots of sense. So what Jesus is saying is that leading up to the destruction of the Temple there's going to be this time of great tribulation, okay, of wars and rumors of wars. And sure enough, we know that from Josephus and other historians that when the Romans came in and destroyed the Temple it was an unprecedented time of suffering and death. Over a million Jews were killed. They were crucifying Jews, 500 Jews a day, the Romans were, outside the city of Jerusalem. It was an unprecedented amount of bloodshed and horror and death. People were starving inside the city, eating their own children. It was a terrible, terrible time. So all of this tribulation is described in the preceding verses that we don't actually hear from today.

So Jesus here describes after the tribulation, "the sun will be darkened, moon will not give its light, the stars will be falling from heaven and powers in heaven will be shaken. And they'll see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory, and they'll send out his angels, gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth and from the ends of heaven." Okay, now when you read those verses your first move, the first thing you think of, will probably be the final coming of Jesus, the end of time right, the final judgment, the Son of Man coming in power and glory. There is a sense in which that's definitely true of these verses, however, a number of scholars have pointed out that if you look at Jesus' words in light of the Old Testament, the very images he uses here of the sun being darkened, the moon not giving its light, the stars falling from heaven are also images that the

prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others used to refer to the destruction of a city or the destruction of an Empire. So if you go back to Jeremiah 13, or you go back to Jeremiah 3, or Isaiah 1 or several other prophecies in the Old Testament, whenever the prophets would describe God coming in judgment to destroy a city they would say things like the sun went dark, the stars fell from heaven, the moon didn't give it's light, God comes on the clouds in judgment, right. So what they use there is they use cosmic images to refer to a political event of cosmic significance, like the overthrow of a major city, whether it's Babylon or Egypt or Jerusalem, the prophets would use similar images for Jerusalem. So the prophetic language in the Old Testament doesn't necessarily, in fact we know it doesn't, mean the end of time because those were just historical events where cities had been destroyed because of their sinfulness. So on one level here a case can be made that Jesus is actually talking about the Son of Man coming in judgment when Jerusalem is destroyed.

One last note too. It's not just the prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, it's also Daniel. In the Book of Daniel 8 when he describes the Temple being desecrated he says that the stars fall from heaven, right. This is an image basically of angelic powers being overthrown because the angels were believed to not just reside in the Temple but also to act as the kind of heavenly Temple ministers so that when the Temple is destroyed the stars that represent the angels fall from heaven. So he's not speaking literally about actual stars falling down to Earth, he's talking about the cosmic ramifications of the desecration and destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. So a number of scholars have said that Jesus is talking about the same thing here. He's using prophetic images to describe the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

And in support of that interpretation, if you move into the next verse there, he gives an image of the fig tree to illuminate that. He says to the disciples that you need to look at the fig tree. Once the branches become tender and they start to put forth new growth, like green leaves in the late spring, you can tell that summer is near. So also when you see these things taking place, tribulation, wars, rumors of wars, the desecration of the Temple, the abomination and desolation, all these actions, all these activities, all this suffering and distress, know that he is near at the very gates. And that's the clue there. What does he mean at the gates? Well as commentaries have pointed out here Jesus appears to be talking about the gates of the city of Jerusalem. So he seems to be giving here a prophecy of the Son of Man, in a sense, coming in judgment over the Temple in Jerusalem. And in support of

that just look at the verse, he says, “truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.” Sure enough we know from history that the wars, the false prophets, all those things arose within one generation, 40 years after the death of Jesus. Around 30 A.D. within four decades by 70 A.D. the Temple had been destroyed, Jerusalem had been totally leveled by the Roman armies in the great Jewish and Roman war. So one generation did not pass before those things had taken place.

However, here's where the lectionary moves into a different topic or distinct topic, he now shifts and talks about the passing away of heaven and Earth, the end of the world. Notice what he says, “heaven and earth will pass away but my words will [not] pass away. But of that day and that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Now it's unfortunate that the lectionary ends at this point because Jesus gives a second parable in the Gospel of Mark, you can go back and look at it in verses 34 and following. After he says that we don't know when heaven and Earth is going to pass away he gives a different parable. Here the parable is of a master who goes away, leaves his servants in charge of his house, and then is going to come back to the house at an unexpected hour when the servants don't know and the servants aren't ready for it. So the fig tree image emphasizes that you should know and you should be ready, whereas the master and servant parable emphasizes that you don't know and you won't be ready if you don't keep awake or watch. So that parable relates to the destruction of the end of the world, and of that day and hour Jesus says here, and you can hear the contrast, no one knows, not even the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father.

I make this distinction here not to just get into the minutia of something that attracted me for my dissertation, but also to make a really serious point, which is that some scholars have argued, especially in the 20th century some skeptics have said that Jesus gave a date for when the world would end, that he said it would end within one generation. And of course if you look around the world is still going, therefore he was wrong, if he was wrong he wasn't the Messiah, if he wasn't the Messiah he certainly was not the Son of God. That's the argument. So this passage will be used against Christians and the Christian claim that Jesus was in fact a true prophet and true Messiah. But that kind of interpretation completely misses Jesus' emphatic statement that with regard to heaven and Earth passing away no one knows, not even the angels or the Son but only the Father.

So in short, Jesus here is talking about two events: the end of the world and the destruction of Jerusalem. One of them will happen within a generation, and you should be able to tell when it's coming. The other one is going to happen at a time and a day when no one knows and so we need to be ready. And again remember, one of them prefigures the other, because just as the Temple being destroyed is like a kind of dissolution of this microcosm, this little universe, where the Son of Man comes in judgment over the city and the Temple, so at the end of time Jesus will come in judgment over the cosmic Temple of the universe itself at the final judgment. So in a sense, what happens to Jerusalem in a local way, a period of tribulation followed by destruction and judgment, will happen to the world in a global way at the end of time. That's the relationship between the two.

Okay, with all that in mind let's go back to the Old Testament background for today. The reading is from the Book of Daniel 12:1-3, and it gives us a little bit of a clue as to where Jesus is getting this idea of salvation following tribulation. The idea that suffering precedes redemption, and that through a time of great suffering will come great salvation, this goes back to the Book of Daniel 12:1-3 which says this, this is a prophecy of the future. Daniel writes:

At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Okay, so notice a couple of elements of this reading. Number one, Saint Michael, look at that, in the Old Testament. He's one of three angels that are mentioned in the Old Testament by name: St. Michael, St. Gabriel, and St. Raphael. They're all mentioned in the Old Testament, and here Michael in the Book of Daniel is revealed to be the angelic guardian of Israel, he's called the prince of the people. The idea here is just as an earthly king protects the people of Israel on Earth, so Michael, a kind of heavenly prince, is their heavenly guardian who battles against

the wicked angels of other nations in a fight for the holiness and safety of the people of Israel. So you can look at Daniel 10:21, another place in Daniel where St. Michael is described as fighting the wicked angels on behalf of Israel. So where do we get this idea of St. Michael the Archangel defend us in battle? The Old Testament. It comes straight from the Book of Daniel. the idea that he is the warrior angelic prince, who not only leads the people but fights for them.

Second, at the time when Michael arises there's also going to be a time of great evil, great tribulation. So the idea here is that when you see evil on Earth it's not just people doing bad things, it's not just people whose parents didn't raise them right, okay. The idea is that when times of trouble and tribulation break out on Earth the ultimate result is that wicked angels and evil angelic powers have been unleashed upon the world. So there's a kind of spiritual battle that's invisibly going on in heaven and it has visible ramifications on Earth, and this time of tribulation is going to lead up to a time of salvation where the dead will be raised. Some will come and enter into everlasting life, some into everlasting contempt. So why are we reading this today? This is the background to Jesus' prophecy on the Mount of Olives about a time of tribulation that will proceed the time of salvation and the coming of the Son of Man. So what my dissertation was about was the fact that in Jewish thought, salvation, here's the key, always comes through suffering, right. Redemption always comes through tribulation. It's only through the cross, so to speak, that the Resurrection will take place, and we already see that in the Book of Daniel, the idea that spiritual trial and tribulation leads ultimately to resurrection for the righteous, but also to judgment for the unrighteous.

So what then do we need to pray? Well we need to pray for God's protection in times of spiritual trial and tribulation. So the Responsorial Psalm for this week has a prayer, it says:

You are my inheritance, O Lord!

In other words, I want to be brought ultimately into that heavenly promised land, that heavenly inheritance of life with God, and so we pray for example in verse 10 of Psalm 16, we say to the Lord:

For thou dost not give me up to Sheol,

or let thy godly one see the Pit.

In other words, God does not abandon his chosen people in the time of tribulation. So with all that said there's another enormous issue which this passage raises. It's more of a Christological issue, a theological issue. It's the question of: how can Jesus not know the day or hour if he is the divine Son of God? This is a question that goes back to ancient times, this is not a modern issue. And I have to say I think it's probably one of the most difficult Christological questions that the Bible raises. It's very complex because we're trying to, in a sense, get inside the mind of the God-man, of the one who is fully God and fully man, and understand what these words can mean.

So in this case what I'd like to do is just at least familiarize you with how the church has answered this question over the centuries in two authoritative texts. So the first one is Pope St. Gregory the Great. So St. Gregory the Great, around 600 A.D., there was a heresy that had risen up, a group known as the *Agnoētes*. You probably heard the word agnostic before, it comes from a Greek term meaning to not know. So the *Agnoētes* were a group of Christians who were saying that Jesus did not know everything and they pointed to Mark 13:32 as the ground for that assertion. It says, "of that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father." So Pope Gregory the Great responded to the claim that Jesus did not know the day or hour in an absolute sense, that the *Agnoētes* were making, and this is how he explained it. So here I'm quoting from this book, this is Heinrich Denzinger's book, it's a *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*. This is kind of like an official compendium of major dogmatic statements from popes and councils and creeds over the centuries, from the first century all the way up to today. And St. Gregory the Great, his letter about the knowledge of Christ is actually contained in this book. So I'm quoting here from paragraph 475 of Denzinger, and this is what St. Gregory the Great says:

Thus, it is also said that only the Father knows, because the Son who is one in being with him has, from the nature that he receives from him and that is superior to that of the angels, a knowledge that angels do not have. This can also, therefore, be understood in a more subtle way by saying that the only begotten Son incarnate, made perfect man for us, knew the day and the hour

of judgment *in* his human nature but did not know it *from* his human nature. What he knew, therefore, *in* his humanity he did not know *from* it, because it is by the power of his divinity that God-made-man knew the day and the hour of judgment.... The God-man knows therefore the day and hour of judgment, but precisely because God is man.²

That's Gregory the Great, his letter 10.39. It was a letter written to an early Bishop in the church in the year 680 A.D. So notice what Gregory the Great says there against the *Agnoētes*, who denied that Christ had any knowledge of the day or hour. Gregory the Great says no, we have to understand his words more subtly there. When he says he didn't know the day or hour, what he means is that he did not know it from his human nature, not that he didn't know it as man. So he's making the distinction between the human nature of Christ and the divine nature of Christ. So you recall for example in the Gospel of Luke, it says in chapter 2 that Jesus grew in wisdom and understanding and favor with God and men. Now it is not possible for God, in whom there is no shadow of change right, to grow in knowledge as God in his divine nature, right. His divine nature is perfect, it's omniscient, it knows all things, but in his humanity Christ does grow, just like his body grows, in his human intellect and his human soul in wisdom and understanding. We know that from the Scriptures. So what Gregory the Great is doing here is making a distinction between the source of Jesus' knowledge of the day or hour. What he's saying here is that although Jesus doesn't know it from his human nature, in other words, the source of his knowledge of the end doesn't come from his humanity, which is limited and finite and fully human, but rather comes from his divine nature, right. So he knows it not from his human nature but he does know it in his human nature. So the earliest papal statement on this basically says Jesus as the divine Son and from his divinity does know the day and hour in so far as to be divine is to know all things. So that was against the *Agnoētes*.

Now if you fast-forward over a millennium to the Catechism, the contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church* actually quotes St. Gregory the Great's letter in the footnotes but it gives a slightly different spin on the issue. So let me just quote from the Catechism here. So if you look at the Catechism, paragraphs 473 to 474,

² Gregory the Great, *Letters* 10.39; cf. DS 475

there's a whole section on the knowledge of Christ. I don't have time to read through it in its entirety but I would encourage you if this is something you've puzzled about or wondered about, look at the Catechism's paragraph 471 to 474. It kind of takes you through an official brief but clear explanation of this mystery of Christ's human knowledge and how it relates to his divine knowledge. In any case, for our purposes here, the most important line with regard to how to interpret Mark 13:32 comes in paragraph 473 and 74, alright. This is what it says:

By its union to the divine wisdom in the person of the Word incarnate, Christ enjoyed in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal. *What he admitted to not knowing in this area...*

That's a reference to Mark 13:32.

*...he elsewhere declared himself not sent to reveal.*³

What's it referring to there? Remember at the beginning of the Book of Acts when the apostles say to him, hey is this the time you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel and Jesus replies to them and says it is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. Remember that point? Okay, that's what the church is appealing to there. So what the Catechism is basically saying is, what Jesus says in one place to not know he elsewhere clarifies as having not been sent to reveal. In any case, however we interpret the verse, the Catechism and the teaching of the church is very clear that it should never in any way impugn on the fullness of Jesus' divinity, that he is not just truly man but also truly God.

³ CCC 473-474; citing Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7