

The Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Malachi 3:19-20A
<i>Response</i>	The Lord comes to rule the earth with justice.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 98:5-6, 7-8, 9
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Thessalonians 3:7-12
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 21:5-19

Now we turn to the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time. Although this is the second to last Sunday in the entire liturgical year, it is really the last Sunday where we walk through the Gospel of Luke and the public ministry of Jesus as it's described in Luke in order. That is why this Sunday the Church has its focus on Jesus' final great discourse to the disciples on the threshold of his passion, the discourse known as the Olivet discourse, because Jesus delivers it on the Mount of Olives. So we're going to look at this passage from the Gospel of Luke 21. This is the famous account of Jesus, once He's arrived in Jerusalem but not yet begun His Passion. He and the disciples leave the city, they go out to the Mount of Olives, which is east of the city, and from there you can see the temple. And the disciples have all remarked about how amazing the temple is, and this leads Jesus to give them His famous oracle, His prophetic oracle about the coming destruction of the temple and the time of tribulation that the disciples are going to face in the midst of that, or in the lead-up to the temple's destruction.

So we'll look at this together, although let me begin with a caveat here. My doctoral dissertation is on the tribulation, so I have a lot to say about this. I'm going to try to keep it as short as possible. It's one of my favorite topics to study...and obviously also an important one, because the Church ends the liturgical year with us focusing our attention on this. So let's read it together, put it in

context, and try to connect it the Old Testament and the psalm. Alright...Luke 21:5-19 reads as follows:

And as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, “As for these things which you see, the days will come when there shall not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” And they asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign when this is about to take place?” And he said, “Take heed that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified; for this must first take place, but the end will not be at once.”

Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be a time for you to bear testimony. Settle it therefore in your minds, not to meditate beforehand how to answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.¹

That’s the end of the Gospel. Okay, there are three key aspects of this Gospel we want to look at. First and foremost, what is Jesus exactly talking about here? Well, as the context makes clear, the primary meaning of this particular oracle is the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. So the setting for this oracle that He’s given is they’re across the valley on the Mount of Olives, seeing the temple, and some of the disciples, who maybe were kind of country bumpkins, were kind of amazed at

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.

the glory of this beautiful place. Jesus takes the opportunity from their amazement to say, “You see the temple? Not one stone is going to be left upon another. All of it is going to be thrown down.” So He’s saying the temple is going to be destroyed, much like it had been in 587 BC by the Babylonians. So this has happened before. And there were other prophets, like Jeremiah, who said it was going to happen.

So in this case, the disciples recognize what Jesus is saying, and so they ask Him, “Well, tell us...when will this be? When will the temple be destroyed? And what’s going to be the signs that that happens?” So Jesus launches into a description of what’s going to happen before the temple is destroyed, and He basically describes a time of great tribulation—of wars, rumors of wars, of famines and plagues, of conflict breaking out between nations, and even signs in the Heavens. And He says, “But when these things happen, don’t be alarmed. Don’t be afraid, because the end is not yet.” He also describes basically what appear to be false prophets or false messiahs who are going to come in His name and say, “I am Christ” or “I am He.” And He says, “Don’t go after them. Don’t follow them and don’t be led astray. Don’t be deceived.”

So the message then to the disciples is one of alertness, but also of a warning, that they are in fact going to be persecuted in this period of strife that will take place between the death of Jesus and the leadup to the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem. Now, if you know your history from the first century, you’ll recall that this did in fact happen. Jesus was crucified sometime around 30-33 AD, and then within 40 years, in 70 AD, the temple was destroyed, in fact, by the Roman Empire. They came and they besieged the city of Jerusalem. They burned it to the ground, and they tore the temple down. And they massacred hundreds and hundreds of thousands of (up to a million) Jews, Josephus tells us, in the destruction of the city. This was called the Great War between the Jews and Rome—or sometimes called the Jewish War. And it was an awful, awful period, and if you read even just the book of Acts, you can see that many of Jesus’ prophecies are fulfilled here. The apostles are in fact betrayed, they are in fact persecuted. Some of them are in fact put to death. They’re brought before governors and kings. In other words, they suffer during this time of strife and tribulation and war and bloodshed. And in the midst of all of that, Jesus’ message to them is: “Don’t be afraid. Don’t be led astray, because this is the time for you to bear witness or to

give testimony.” And the Greek word there for testimony is *martyrion*. We get the word martyr from that. Literally, the word martyr means “someone who bears witness, someone who gives testimony.”

So in the Christian tradition, we come to associate that word with someone who bears witness even unto death, because that’s in fact what happened not just to the apostles, but to many Christians during the persecutions that broke out after Jesus’ death in the city of Jerusalem—like with Saul, who later became Paul...as well as later persecutions that took place in Rome throughout the empire, especially under Caesar Nero, who was a very wicked Roman emperor in the 60s of the first century AD. So this prophecy, on one level, simply refers to the time of strife and tribulation that would break out before the temple destruction and between the years 30 and 70 AD.

However, the Church has always seen a deeper significance in the prophecy of the temple’s destruction, because the Jews saw a deeper significance in the temple itself. So in order to understand the deeper significance or the deeper meaning of Jesus’ words, it’s important to remember what the temple was to a first century Jew. The temple was not just like a really beautiful building. It had three key elements that were significant. Number one, it was the dwelling place of God. So for example, in the book of Kings, 1 Kings 8, when Solomon builds the temple, the Lord comes down from Heaven to dwell in the temple through His glory cloud, the *shekhinah*, the glory cloud.

Number two, the temple was the sole place of sacrifice. So for example, in the book of Deuteronomy 12, it makes very clear that if you were a Jew and you wanted to worship God through sacrifice—if you wanted to bring a sin offering or a thanksgiving offering—you couldn’t do it just anywhere. You couldn’t do it at your house or in your backyard or in some city that was closest to you. You had to go to one place and one place only...and that was the temple in Jerusalem, the central sanctuary—only place for worshiping God through sacrifice. So this is something that sometimes we forget when we see contemporary Judaism, which has many synagogues spread throughout the world. In Jesus’ day, there were certainly synagogues, but Judaism was focused on the temple. You had to go there

to sacrifice, you had to go there to worship God through the priesthood and the liturgy and the sacrifices.

And then third and finally, this is the one that's most significant for understanding Jesus' prophecies and what they might mean for us. The temple was viewed as a microcosm of Heaven and Earth. In other words, the Jews saw the architecture of the temple itself as symbolizing the Heavens and the Earth. So for example, the first century Jewish historian Josephus—I've mentioned him before—he actually says in one of his descriptions of the tabernacle of Moses, which was the prototype for the temple, he writes that the parts of the temple were, quote:

...were in every one made in way of imitation and representation of the universe. (Antiquities 3.7.81)

That's in his book, Antiquities, book 3.7, paragraph 81. So what's he's saying there...Josephus is saying that the different parts of the temple, like the bronze sea that was full of water, represented the sea. He said that the lamp stand, the menorah in the temple, represented the lights of the Heavens, the seven planets that you could see in the Heavens. And on the veil of the temple, that basically divided the inner room from the outer court, Josephus tells us that on that veil was woven the constellations—all the stars of Heaven. They actually put the constellations on the veil to symbolize the fact that the veil represented Heaven, whereas behind the veil represented the Heaven of Heavens. In other words, the invisible realm of God...which, by the way, we're not doing this right now, but it's kind of interesting, because as we see in the Gospels, the veil of the temple is torn in two. And what does that mean? Heaven itself torn open, so to speak, by the death of Christ.

In any case, for the Jews then, the universe was like a macro temple. It was a holy place where God spiritually dwelt. But the earthly Jerusalem temple was like a micro universe; it was a microcosm. So for the Jew, when the temple was destroyed, there was a real sense in which the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem symbolized and signified the destruction of the whole universe—the destruction of Heaven and Earth, the dissolution of the entire cosmos...and ultimately, then, the day of the final judgment.

So with that in mind, you can actually then go back to the Old Testament reading and you'll see that one of the reasons the Church gives us this reading at the end of the liturgical year is not simply because it's the last thing that Jesus spoke about, but it's also because She's starting to shift our attention, as the Church, to the final judgment and the second coming of Jesus at the end of time, to the destruction of the world and its renewal in a new Heavens and a new Earth (like I talked about last week in the resurrection).

So if you want to see an example of this, you can turn to the Old Testament reading for the day. Today, the first reading is from the book of Malachi 4. And in Malachi 4:1-2....most Bibles, Malachi is either the last book or the third to last book in the Old Testament. It's the last of the prophets. So this is how the prophets ended. In Malachi 4:1 we read:

“For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.

So a very poetic description of what the prophets referred to as the “day of the Lord”...the day of the Lord. This was a standard prophetic expression for the final judgment, for the day of judgment when God would come in power and might and glory as a consuming fire, and that the fire would have two different effects. On the wicked, it would be a fire of judgment—a destroying fire or a consuming fire. But for the righteous, the fire of God would come and rise like the sun. The sun is a fire, but it gives life, right? It gives light. And so this sun of justice is going to rise on the righteous, whereas the fire of judgement is going to fall on the wicked.

So the first reading for this Sunday is really a reading about the day of the Lord or the final day of judgment. And the connection then, if you turn to the Responsorial Psalm, is Psalm 98, which also continues this theme of the coming judgment, or of the cosmic nature of the coming of God and the judgment of the Lord. So Psalm 98...it's interesting though, because the refrain for this psalm is that the Lord comes to rule the Earth with justice. So He's coming, He's coming in judgment, but rather

than meeting Him with fear, the universe actually rejoices that God is going to come and judge the world, because the universe, in a sense, is personified and awaiting this judgment when God will make all things new.

So, just a few verses here from the psalm. Psalm 98:5 and following says this...or actually I'll start with verse 4:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together
before the Lord, for he comes
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

So, very beautiful, very powerful psalm there, and it's something I think is really challenging to us. I don't know about you, but for me, at times in my life when I've thought about the final judgment, it can be something that's kind of terrifying. It's overwhelming to ponder God coming to judge not just me but to judge the whole world. But the Scriptures here, especially the psalm, teach us that that's not how the righteous react to the coming judgment of God. That's not how the cosmos reacts, so to speak, to the coming of God. The righteous should be overjoyed that God is coming to judge, because He's going to judge with equity. He's going to judge with righteousness and justice, which is saying a lot if you think about how often in our world judgment is carried out without justice. Injustice reigns in all kinds of ways throughout the world. But when God comes to judge, He will judge with righteousness, He'll judge with justice.

And as we know from elsewhere in the Scriptures, He's also going to judge with mercy. So mercy, justice, righteousness...those are the things that should actually make us long for the final judgment, long for the final coming of God, when He will set all things right, and He will judge His people with equity and righteousness. So it's a beautiful psalm.

Alright, now, with all that said then, what's our takeaway from this particular text? How has Jesus's prophecies of the destruction of the temple and the coming time of trial that leads to the judgment—how have they functioned in the Church? Well, in this case, as you probably know, if you've—you can just go on the Internet for a few minutes, you'll see...there's so much speculation about the final judgment, about the second coming of Christ at the end of time. And in particular, lots of speculation about the tribulation that is supposed to precede the final judgment of Christ—a time of deception and trial and wars and persecution. And sometimes Catholics can be a little confused about what to believe about that, especially when it gets associated with problematic ideas like the idea of the rapture, I'll be talking about that in just a couple of weeks. So I thought it'd be helpful in this case just to give a little insight from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This is the official compendium of the Church's teachings on matters of faith and morals. And the Catechism actually addresses these texts that we just looked at from Jesus in two key places.

First, in paragraph 585 of the Catechism, it discusses Jesus' relationship with the temple. And it makes a good point...it says that...well, first of all, on the one hand, Jesus respected the temple in Jerusalem. He worshiped in the temple in Jerusalem, like all the other Jews. He celebrated the feasts and He went to Passover with His parents, He called it His Father's house, and He called it a house of prayer. So that's on the one hand.

On the other hand, however, He also predicted that it would be destroyed. He predicted that it would be overthrown. And the Catechism says in paragraph 585, quoting Luke 21—which is the passage we just read—that when Jesus prophesied the destruction of the temple, it says He:

...announced a sign of the last days, which were to begin with his

own Passover.

So what the Church is saying there is that from the time that Jesus began His passion, His suffering and His death, the last days, the end times, started. So if someone ever says to you, “Are we in the end times? Are we in the last days?” You can say to them, well, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we are, and we have been in the last days since the passion and death and resurrection of Jesus, since His prophecies of the temple’s destruction. And you can see that, because remember the temple represents the whole universe, represents the cosmos. So its symbolic destruction signifies the end, so to speak, of this world.

However, the Church also says (in paragraph 675, which is one of the most intriguing passages in the Catechism) that before the ultimate judgment, the final judgment and the dissolution of this world and the coming of the New Creation and the new Heavens and new Earth, that the Church (like the apostles before us) will pass through a final time of trial, will pass through a final time of tribulation that will be marked by apostasy, people abandoning the faith, as well as deception and other sufferings and other trials. And so this is in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 675, so I’m just going to quote it exactly, so you can see the application here. The Church teaches:

Before Christ’s second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth...

And I’ll pause here. The footnote there refers to Luke 21:12, which is the verse we just read for this Sunday in the lectionary.

The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the “mystery of iniquity” in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh.

Then skip to paragraph 677...

The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection. The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven. God's triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgment after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world.

That's the teaching of the Church, drawing on the teaching of Jesus Himself. And so the Church gives us the words of Christ to the disciples to prepare, to be ready for suffering, to be ready for persecution and tribulation at the end of the liturgical year, because She is helping us, through the words of Jesus, to prepare for (so to speak) the last days. These are the last days of the liturgical year, but also to prepare for the final advent of Christ, which will be preceded, according to the Church, by this time of tribulation and trial and suffering and death.

And you can see why the Church says elsewhere that we've always been in these last days, because if you look at the long history of the Church from the time of the apostles all the way up to today, the mystery of suffering and persecution and martyrdom has always been played out in the Church. There's never been a season in the Church's history where She wasn't being conformed to Christ crucified, through the witnesses of Her martyrs, through their suffering, through their persecution, and through their death.

And so all of us are called, in a sense, to make ready for the final judgment of Christ by bearing witness to Him, even in times of trial and suffering and death. So with those somewhat solemn words, we prepare for next week, which will be the feast of the glorious reign of Christ the King of the universe.

Oh, by the way...you probably have lots of questions about the tribulation and the antichrist, and just the eschatology—the teaching of the Church about the end times. I just want to let you know that before I go, that if you'd like to learn more about that, you can check out the Bible study that I did on the end times. It's called

Jesus and the End Times: A Catholic View of the Last Days. And there I take you through not just what the Gospels teach (what Jesus says in the Gospels), but also the teachings of St. Paul, and on the “rapture,” as well as the book of Revelation. So if you want to dig into this from a Catholic perspective, I’d recommend you check out that set: Jesus and the End Times.