

The Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31
<i>Response</i>	Blessed is every one who fears the Lord
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 5:1-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Abide in me, and I in you. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 25:14-30

The thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A brings our journey through Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians to a close as we turn to chapter 5 of this short but very consequential epistle of St. Paul to the Church at Thessaloniki. Since we're drawing to the end of the liturgical year, it's fitting that we would also begin to think about the end times. And that's really what the reading for today is all about for this Sunday. So if we turn to 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6, the second reading is one of Paul's famous descriptions of the end of time, of the eschaton, of the day of the Lord, the day of final judgment. And this is what St. Paul says. After comforting the Church at Thessaloniki in its anxiety over people who have died, who they thought might miss out on the *parousia*, on the second coming of Christ, Paul says this:

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.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, so a couple of things here. This passage that the Church gives us for the thirty-third Sunday is about what scholars refer to as eschatology. The Greek word *eschaton* means “the end.” Eschatology is the study of the end times, the study of the last things, the study of what the Old and New Testaments tell us about the end of the world, about the end of time.

Paul...it’s interesting...as he’s teaching eschatology to the Church at Thessaloniki—and a lot of this letter as we’ve seen in 1 Thessalonians is about eschatological questions, which the first Christians had and which people have to this day about the end times. It’s a topic people are very curious about. They want to know: Where are we going? What does the future hold?

The first thing you’ll notice here is that Paul has already catechized the Church at Thessaloniki. He actually says:

...as to the times and the seasons...

And that’s meaning the end times and the signs of the end. Paul says:

...you have no need to have anything written to you.

It’s a little ironic that he’s saying that, because obviously they do need to have something written to them, because the fact that he wrote 1 Thessalonians means they needed some clarification. But rhetorically, what Paul means there is “I’ve already taught you about this.” So he says:

For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (1 Thessalonians 5:2)

So what you can infer from this, and what commentators had inferred from these words—and this is very important—is that eschatology or the doctrine of the end and of the last days (the Church’s teaching on that, Christ’s teaching on the end times) is not some marginal, obscure topic...like a secret mystery that we only

induct the elite into. No, it's part of catechesis. It's part of the general teaching of the Church. It's part of the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel.

Even though he isn't with that Church very long, he considered it important enough to have actually given them at least a basic catechesis on what's going to happen at the end of time, because that was part of Christ's teaching. His last famous sermon to the apostles was the Olivet discourse, which was all about the end times. So Paul's first statement here is...it's just important to emphasize that if you're interested in the end times (in other words), the first thing you should do is read what Jesus said about the end times and read what the New Testament says about the end times, so that you get the apostolic proclamation of the end times, rather than looking to popular apocalyptic novels or maybe private revelations that you've heard about that people might say about exactly what's going to happen in the end.

I've noticed a lot of Catholics who look for their eschatological doctrine in areas...they tend to start by looking at things that are not public revelation but rather private revelation or private opinion. And those things might have a place, but the foundation for Christian eschatology and for Catholic eschatology is the teaching of Christ and the apostles. And Paul—in particular his letter to the Thessalonians—are a central repository of apostolic teaching on the end.

So with that said, the main teaching that Paul is emphasizing in the reading for today is the unknown character and the unexpected nature of the end of the world. Basically, what he's doing is reiterating the teaching of Jesus from the Olivet discourse (like in Matthew 24)...that when it comes to the question of "When will the world end? When will the final judgment take place? When will the destruction of the world and the creation of a new universe (the new Heavens and a new Earth)...when will that take place?" Well, Jesus says in his teaching to the apostles:

But of that day and hour no one knows....

So the unknown dimension of the timing of the *parousia* (the second coming) is a basic teaching of Jesus which Paul is reiterating here, using the imagery of a thief in the night. So what he says here is:

When people say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape.

So notice, again, he’s drawing there on the teaching of Jesus. This is from the Gospels—Matthew 24, for example—where Jesus says that the days of the Son of man (the coming of the Son of man) will be like the days of Noah, where people are eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, and then the flood came suddenly and destroyed them all.

So in other words, the vast majority of people were unaware of the coming cosmic judgment of the flood in Genesis 6-9. In the same way, at the end of time, at the final judgment, the vast majority of people are going to be unprepared and not ready for the destruction and the judgment that’s going to come upon them. There’s an unknown element to its timing. But Paul says:

But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

So there’s two dimensions here to the teaching here. On the one hand, Paul is reiterating the fact that we don’t know the day or the hour. Just like a woman...she knows she’s going to have a baby at some point, but you don’t know exactly when the hard labor is going to hit, despite the myth of due dates. A doctor might give you a due date, but that doesn’t mean you’re necessarily—that the birth pangs are going to come on that date. And even more in antiquity was this the case that the mystery of when the birth pangs would come was something that you had no control over. You’re waiting, you know that there’s going to be an end to the pregnancy when the child is born. But you don’t know the day or the hour when those birth pangs will hit.

In the same way, we don’t know when the tribulation that is going to precede the final judgment exactly is going to happen. However, we—unlike the world, Paul is

saying here, unlike believers who aren't aware of what Christ has taught us—we know that it's coming, and so we need to be prepared rather than unprepared. We need to be awake rather than asleep. We need to be sober rather than drunk.

And he doesn't mean either of those literally. He's not talking about literal sobriety or literally being awake...although obviously, he warns against drunkenness elsewhere in his letters. But he's using them as metaphors for a moral laxity. So we need to be morally awake, spiritually vigilant, and morally sober in order to be spiritually and morally prepared for what he calls "the day of the Lord."

Now what is the day of the Lord? Well, here Paul is—although he's writing to Greek Christians, Christians who are Greek-speaking who have converted from paganism to Christianity, to use anachronistic terminology, if that's the case. So they become believers in Christ. That's a Jewish term, when Paul speaks about the day of the Lord. If you go back to the Old Testament, the book of Amos for example, or the book of Joel, or the book of Isaiah...they all use the expression "the day of the Lord" to refer to the day of judgment.

Now in the Old Testament, it can refer to particular events of judgment, like the judgment of Babylon or the judgment of Egyptians—the day of the Lord, like when there's destruction or warfare in which God punishes those who offend him on Earth, especially the pagan nations who have persecuted the people of Israel.

But it becomes a stock expression not just for particular judgments, but for the last one that's going to happen at the end of human history. So what Paul is saying here is you need to be ready for the day of the Lord, because even though we know it's coming, we don't know the day or the hour. And the imagery he uses here of a thief in the night is very mysterious but also very powerful. Because when you go to bed at night, if you were to be robbed in the middle of the night—most of us lock our doors, precisely because when we are asleep, we are more vulnerable. And if a thief sneaks into our home in order to steal, we don't know when exactly that's going to happen. It tends to happen in the night, under cover of darkness, but we don't know the timing of it.

So Paul is actually getting that analogy of the thief in the night from Jesus, once again. This is an apostolic re-presentation of the teaching of Christ. So if you go back to Matthew 24, for example, verses 42 and following, we read these words. He says, after describing the days of Noah and the coming of the *parousia*, the second coming, he says:

Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

So there's that tension between the definiteness of the final judgment—we know it's going to happen—but then the uncertainty of the exact timing. And that tension is part of the preaching of Jesus to the apostles. And in that tension, Christians are supposed to live in order to be morally and spiritually prepared for the judgment, for the day of judgment.

Alright, so Paul's moral exhortation is vigilance. Keep awake, be sober, and be ready. Don't live your life as if the world is not going to end, in other words. Because there are a lot of people who do, and that's a foolish way to live, Paul is saying. You need to be aware and be awake and be vigilant.

Also, as we bring our discussion of 1 Thessalonians to a close, our journey through that, I just also want to recommend...if you'd like to dig in a little deeper, an excellent Catholic commentary on 1 Thessalonians is this one by Nathan Eubank in the Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture series entitled *First and Second Thessalonians*. This is a real accessible but more in depth commentary on the book than I've been able to do in these videos, and I think you would really benefit from checking this out and reading through it carefully.

In closing, a couple points from the tradition on this particular passage from 1 Thessalonians. Because again, as we're coming to the end of the liturgical year, we're looking forward to the eschaton. We're looking forward to the end times. Two things here. First, St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, as I've mentioned

before, wrote commentaries on all of St. Paul's letters. And in his *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians*, he says this about the uncertainty of the end and also the imagery of the thief. Thomas says:

“It shall ‘come as a thief’, that is, unannounced: “if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would have been awake” (Luke 12:38).

So he's quoting there from the Gospel of Luke, so he's aware. Thomas is aware of the roots of Paul's teaching in Christ's words.

“The day of the Lord will come like a thief” (2 Pet 3:10). “I will come like a thief” (Rev 3:3)... [I]t is not certain at what hour it will occur.²

Now notice there, it's fascinating—Peter, John, Paul, and Jesus Himself all use the image of a thief to describe the *parousia*, to describe the second coming, in order to convey in a really concrete and memorable way the unknown nature of the final hour. And if you think about it, it's a striking image, because we think of thieves as criminals. A thief is a criminal. So Jesus is using this unexpected imagery to describe His *parousia*. And this is just part of the apostolic teaching—the thief in the night.

That imagery of the thief in the night in popular American Protestant culture in the 1970s actually led to a film called *The Thief in the Night* or *A Thief in the Night*, which was all about the rapture. At least it was a popular film when I was growing up in the 80s. A lot of my Protestant friends had seen it: “Have you seen *A Thief in the Night* movie?” And it was all about this secret disappearance of true believers at the time of the rapture and all that. And they use the imagery of the thief in the night for that. Well, what's fascinating is that as Thomas' quotation there of Peter and John and Paul and Jesus shows, the imagery of the thief in the night is biblical, but it has nothing to do with the rapture. It has to do with the final judgment. It has to do with the end of the world. It has to do with the *parousia*, the second coming of Christ.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians* no. 108; trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P.

The second thing I would say here is from the *Catechism*. So in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, it reemphasizes this doctrine that we don't know when the end is going to happen. And so I always will tell my students this, because every year it seems, there's some prophet or preacher or teacher comes up and gives a timeline for the end and says, "I know...I've read the signs of the times and the world's going to end in 1988 or 1989 or 2011 or 2000 or 2020"...whatever it might be. As soon as someone sets a date for the end of time, you can pretty much bank it on the fact that they're a false teacher, because the teaching of not only Christ but also the official doctrine of the Church is as follows:

Since the Ascension Christ's coming in glory has been imminent, even though "it is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority." (Acts 1:7; cf. Mark 13:32) This eschatological coming could be accomplished at any moment, even if both it and the final trial that will precede it are "delayed."³

In other words, there's this tension between imminence—Christ is coming soon—and apparent delay. So we live in that tension, but what the Church teaches authoritatively here is that we don't know the day or the hour of the final judgment. So our job as disciples, as followers of Jesus, is to be ready...is to be prepared, is to be vigilant, is to keep awake, and to stay sober.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 673; cf. Matt 24:44; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:3-12