

**33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 15, 2009
5:30 PM**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

Welcome to the end of another liturgical year. The last few Sundays before the Feast of Christ the King and the start of a new Advent season are traditionally a time when the church invites us to meditate on “the end times,” the great *eschaton*, the *parousia*. We usually get two or three Sundays on which to do this meditation. The good news is that this year we only get one; the bad news is: it’s today!

People always have varied reactions. Some get frightened. Some see it as an invitation to dream of what might lie ahead for all of us. Some try to just ignore it. But the last option becomes increasingly hard to do in an age of increasing scientific sophistication. The universe as we know it certainly had a beginning, and it will most likely have an end—at least as we know it.

I had the pleasure a few weeks ago of listening to the Mozart *Requiem* at Symphony Hall. There is a section early on where the Sequence of the Mass is sung with terrifying clarity. It’s called the *Dies Irae*. To hear this piece of music is to re-encounter Medieval terror writ large. A beautiful 16th century translation puts it this way: “Day of wrath! O day of mourning / See fulfilled the prophets’ warning / Heaven and earth in ashes burning.”

It sounds very much like the beginning of today's first reading from Daniel. The great prince of heaven, Michael the Archangel, sweeps through the fields of the living with sword in hand. It is a time of unsurpassed distress for all. This is a pretty scary "end of time." Remember that both the Book of Daniel and the Gospel of Mark were written in times of great distress for the people of Israel.

If these images entertain you, you might go to see the brand new movie that opened on Friday: "2012." It's all about the end of the world.

Apparently, California slides unceremoniously into the sea. Haven't we seen that before? I was going to go see it before today's homily—just to illustrate how current I could be. But the reviews were uniformly dreadful. So...you get this. Just as in the movie, the two readings today provide images of what the end of time will be like. And they all fit the times in which they were written.

But there is a wonderful alternative image. Sr. Barbara Reid, O.P., in her weekly scripture piece in *America* magazine, puts it marvelously. Her piece is called "Stardust Made Flesh." She says: "Cosmologists tell us that our bodies are literally stardust made flesh; they are made of particles that were present in the primeval fireball at the beginning of the universe.

Daniel's image of the righteous people becoming stars is, in a sense, inviting us

to be true to what we actually are.”

This image suggests a marvelous dream: that the end times (despite the uncertainty about the timing), whenever they come will return us all to the dimension from which we were all created in the beginning. It almost sounds like New-Age or re-incarnational thinking. But it is in our very own scriptures.

Two of our more renowned contemporary scripture scholars, N.T. Wright and John Dominic Crossen, come to a similar conclusion based solely on the scriptural data. In speaking of the end-times, Crossen says, whatever else we may think about it: “The end of the world is not what we’re talking about. No first century Jew or Christian would think about the end of the world, because that would mean that God had annulled creation, which God would never do. God had created the world...and stamped every day of it as good, good, very good.” Then he adds: “We’re talking about cosmic transformation of this world of evil and injustice and impurity and violence into a world of justice and peace and purity and holiness.” It will be a transformation, not an end to the world as we know it.

N.T. Wright agrees and reminds us that this interpretation of the end of time as we know it was the deepest conviction of the new Christian community

in the first century. It is all the result of Jesus' resurrection and what it meant and still means. Wright says: "With Easter, something has happened to the cosmos." Not just to Jesus. Speaking of Jesus' resurrection he says: "I believe that in his Easter moment, the whole cosmos, in a sense, has a shock wave run through it."

The universe—as we know it—certainly had a beginning (probably 15 million years ago, give or take a billion). And it will most likely have an end—as we know it. When you think about it (if you ever do) some fascinating questions arise.

What do you *want* it to be? What do you believe it *will* be? What do you *dream* it might be? Can any of us really ignore it? It would be like walking thorough a cemetery whistling merrily when you know you're scared—at least a little bit.

Will it be a day of wrath and mourning? Or will it be a day on which we will spark twinkling back to the stars from which we came? With the resurrected Jesus leading the way? It is worth thinking about because it just might change the way we live in *this* universe we do know now—as we know it at all. It is a wise invitation the church offers today. Think about it. Peace!