

Homily: Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time
(*Mk 13:24-32*)

“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 the sky,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
And then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in the clouds’
with great power and glory . . .”

On this Sunday as we draw close to the end of the church year, we begin to hear parts of the scripture that tell of the end times, and apart from trying to fathom what these words could possibly mean for us, it may be a hard thing to remind ourselves that this prophecy that Jesus speaks is Gospel – truly “Good News” – to those who hear it. As the days grow shorter, and as our lives grow perhaps more hectic preparing for the coming holidays, we ask real questions when we ask not only where we are to find hope in these images of cataclysm and destruction but even where we are to find meaning in words that seem very far from the Jesus who also says “come to me all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest.” How are we to make sense of today’s Gospel? And how are we to apply it to our lives today?

For a long time Christians have puzzled over Jesus’ predictions of the end of the world, since – quite clearly – the sun has not fallen out of the sky these past two thousand years, and we still wait for the Son of Man to return. In this day and age, when religion – whether rightly or wrongly – gets blamed for tensions among nations and

peoples, we may wonder whether today's Gospel and its images are not better left on the shelf for awhile, so that we can concentrate on listening to Jesus as the great reconciler and healer. The central question may no longer be how can modern-day people take Jesus' predictions of the end of the world as credible, so much as how do those Christians, who really *are* convinced the end is quite near, see these prophecies shaping the way they look at the world. And yet for those who would listen with the ears of faith, there *is* a message of hope in today's readings, a message to give us strength in our lives when at times it seems as though the sun and moon and stars that guide us are falling from their places. So the question I wish to ask is . . . how?

It is helpful to know that the people of Jesus' time heard these words from Mark's Gospel (and from the Prophet Daniel) quite differently than we do, and to them the message of God's powerful love for his people came across quite clearly. As strange as these images of the end of the world may be to us, for the people of Jesus' time this kind of apocalyptic writing was just one of many styles of writing they were used to hearing from the Bible, along with their history and the prophets, psalms and proverbs. The idea of the world coming to an end was something to be expected with trepidation – no doubt – but far more important to them (and far more encouraging) was to hear that when the end comes, God will protect his people and gather them together from the far corners of the earth. The lines are clearly drawn; the forces of good and evil are at play, not as they usually are in shades of gray, but in black and white. And so it was for those who heard Jesus' words not so much to choose sides as to remain steadfast, trusting in the promise that despite all the confusion and anxiety that seem at times so overwhelming, the mercy of God *will* overcome the darkness, which in different ways, touches each of

our lives. The great battle between good and evil has *already* been won; it is for us to trust in that promise – and to live our lives as though we really believe it.

I'll grant you, if we were writing a Gospel today, we might reach for a different set of images, but the call to deep faith – as Jesus calls us in today's reading – requires vivid pictures, bold characters . . . great drama. It is no coincidence, I think, that the Book of Daniel and the Gospel of Mark were both written during times when the community of believers experienced persecution – when to be a Jew or a Christian meant putting your faith in God when confessing that same faith publicly might put you to death. People facing such danger need to tell one another stories that call one another to faith – stories where the lines are clear and where the ending is known: good does triumph over evil. Today, we do not face persecution as Christians (at least in this country), but we as a nation face an uncertain world of violence and danger, whether we look to Iraq or Iran or to all too many other places around the globe. And we, like the people of Jesus' time, also look to our stories to give us courage and to call us to do what is right. We look, for instance, to times in our history, when the lines were clearly drawn and the end of a long struggle brought triumph over evil. It is no coincidence, I think, that in the past several years we have seen celebrated in books and movies and television specials the sacrifices – and victories – of those who fought World War II.

Now I'm not saying that when you hear today's Gospel, you should think of Private Ryan or Tom Brokaw . . . but I do hope that you can see past (or more deeply into) the words of the Gospel and find the message of hope that Jesus speaks, even with this dire prophecy. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away," he says to us today, just as he said to his disciples. If not planet earth, our worlds – the

worlds we build for ourselves to live our lives with some degree of routine and normalcy – at times are shaken. Those who have lost someone dear to them, those who are diagnosed with an illness on what was supposed to be a regular check-up, those who suddenly find themselves without a job have their worlds shaken. How else does one describe it? Our worlds, which we put so much effort into maintaining for our peace of mind, are never quite as stable as we would like to think.

And hearing Jesus' words this morning, that's all right, for holding us up is One, who will gather us in "from the four winds" and "from the end of the earth to the end of the sky." And even when our worlds do fall apart – and sooner or later, to a greater or lesser degree, they probably will – we have a God who will help us back to our feet and invite us into a new world, where our peace is guaranteed not by our own efforts but by the Prince of Peace. And *that* is surely Good News.