

Angels in End Times
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 13:24-32)

The Gospel today is an excerpt from the final public sermon Jesus gave in Jerusalem before his arrest and crucifixion. It is the “Eschatological Discourse,” concerning the end times.¹

In the eschatological discourse, Jesus speaks of things that take place not only in history, but also from the perspective of eternity. He speaks of things that happen in his own day, and things that affect the world until his second coming. Past, present, and future all come together in this single sermon, just as they do in the Book of Revelation, making it difficult to understand and interpret.

Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. He warns of the armies that will surround the city (Lk 21:20), the terrible famine and suffering of the people inside, the siege and massacre (Lk 21:24), and the tearing down of the Temple so that not one stone is left upon another (Mk 13:2). He urges his disciples to flee to the mountains when they see these things begin to happen (Mk 13:4), and he tells them it will all take place within their generation (Mk 13:30).

Jesus spoke that prophecy in the year of his death, around 32 A.D. Within a generation (in the Bible one generation = 40 years), in 70 A.D., the Roman armies crushed a great Jewish uprising, and did indeed destroy the temple.

But God had already abandoned the temple at the crucifixion: the inner veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom (Mt 27:51). With his death, the (old) world came to an end. The Old Testament, entirely centered upon the Temple in Jerusalem as God’s dwelling, is over. The Levitical priesthood established by Moses, with all its rituals and sacrifices, is ended. Everything God began, from the beginning of the world, is brought to its fulfillment in Jesus, and replaced.

As Jesus thus came to the end of his earthly ministry, God’s plan for salvation came to fulfillment. Jesus’ death and resurrection affects all creation, because he is the divine “Word” through Whom the world was made (Jn 1:1-3). Jesus said that the sun would be darkened when he was crucified, which indeed happened (Mk 15:33). By his death, the old order dies: the sun goes dark, the moon stops shining, the creation corrupted by sin and darkness comes to an end. The stars and powers of heaven are cast down, referring to the overthrow of the devil by St. Michael and the angels loyal to God (Mk 13:25, Rv 12:4,9).

¹ It is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. St. John gives us the Book of Revelation instead, which will echo Jesus’ words. For instance: “*When the sixth seal was opened, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale*” (Rv 6:12).

By his resurrection, the new order now begins. The New Creation, free of sin and death, is established. Now Jesus raises up a new Temple, and establishes a new and eternal priesthood, based on his own sacrifice as the true Lamb.

In another famous prophecy, Jesus identifies the destruction of the Temple with his death and resurrection: “*Destroy this Temple,*” he said, “*‘and in three days I will raise it up.’ But the Jews replied, ‘It took 46 years to build this temple and you will raise it up in 3 days?’ They didn’t realize he was speaking of the temple of his body*” (Jn 2:19-21).

The new temple which he raises up in three days (Mk 14:58, Jn 2:19), is his Resurrected Body, but more mysteriously, it is the Church, his Mystical Body. The Church is the new Temple, built of living stones (1Pt 2:5). It is not limited to one place or time, like the old temple in Jerusalem, but extends to every place and time that the Gospel can be preached.

This is another important part of the eschatological discourse. Jesus is not simply speaking concretely about the imminent events that will happen in his day, nor vaguely about the great calamities of the end of history, “*of [which] day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*” (Mk 13:32); he is also speaking above all about the evangelizing work of the Church that will take place in the interim, the “end times,” until his second coming.

While “*heaven and earth will pass away,*” and there will be many upheavals in the final age after the Old Testament temple is destroyed, “*[his] words will not pass away*” (Mk 13:31). Christians will have to cling to those words with all their might, because the trials and persecutions will be great. It takes great faith to remain Christian in the end times.

Today many Catholics fall away from the faith, and the Church herself seems weak, giving little light to the world around us. Commenting on this Gospel passage, St. Augustine said, “*The light of truth shall be obscured; because in the great tribulation that shall come on the world, many will fall from the faith, who had seemed to be bright and firm, like the sun and the stars. And the moon, that is, the Church, shall not give her light.*” (Ep. 80, *Ad Hesychium*). The darkening of the sun refers not only to his crucifixion, but to the plight of the Church.

Jesus’ final sermon is a wakeup call – not just to people of his day who were about to face the destruction of their city and temple; but to us, who are complacent about the destruction of our Church, both in the ancient lands of the Mideast, and also in the West. In the east Christianity is being extinguished because Christians are being extinguished. In the West, Christianity is being extinguished because faith is lost, and the light goes out on its own.

In the eschatological sermon, Jesus stressed the “*the gospel must first be preached to all nations*” (Mk 13:10), and the Church would have to give witness before synagogues and governors and kings. He stresses that in glory “*he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth*” (Mk 13:27).

Angels are not only the heavenly messengers like St. Michael, but also those earthly apostles who bring the message of the Gospel to the four corners of the world (“Evangelize” is based upon “angel”). Jesus says the end of the world will not take place until the Gospel has been fully announced to all nations, and everyone has had the opportunity to accept or reject it. He doesn’t say everyone will be saved, only that they will have the opportunity to be saved. In our land we have had that opportunity, but in many ways the West has rejected or ignored the angels of the Gospel.

Terrible attacks against Christians and ongoing upheavals among nations remind us that we are in dark times. The old order, conquered by Christ, still fights on; and the new order of Christianity, still suffers persecution by fire and sword. When the sun is darkened, and the moon no longer gives light, the remnant must remain faithful to our Lord, looking and longing, watchful in prayer (Mk 13:33), for that day when he will suddenly come.

Our calling is to be the “angels,” the messengers of God sent to bring the gift of faith to others. This means:

- fulfilling our baptism promises by living for God and not the world;
- fulfilling our solemn commitment to raise our children in the faith and teach them their prayers and the truths of religion;
- it means coming to Mass every Sunday to be nourished by God’s word and the Holy Eucharist.

Here at Mass we are strengthened with grace for the daily battle of the upcoming week, and equipped with the spiritual lessons we need. Here we receive our “marching orders,” and are solemnly “sent.” Week by week, we learn to build our lives not on the passing order of the old world, but on the living and enduring Word of God, which does not pass away, though heavens and earth will pass away.