

The Day that Assaults
1st Sunday of Advent (C)
(Lk 21:25-36)

On the first Sunday of Advent the Gospel continues the eschatological theme of the past weeks: the coming of the Lord in the end times. Jesus speaks of the great upheaval and turmoil that will characterize these times, and urges his followers to “*stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.*”

In the end times, which begin with his Resurrection, God undertakes a remaking of the world in order to bring forth a new heavens and earth. The old passes away. It is a time of tremendous upheaval, affecting the cosmos itself (“*there will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars... the sea and the waves*”), and involving the history of nations (“*on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed...*”), to the point that “*people will die of fright.*” Through this imagery, Jesus alludes to the great battle which takes place in the end times between the Son of Man and his heavenly Hosts led by St. Michael, and the Powers, Principalities, and legions of the celestial hierarchy in league with the devil (cf. Rv 12). God governs both the natural cosmos and the world of human history providentially, through the ministry of all these angels. Thus the renewal of the world and expulsion of the evil forces will be manifested by profound turmoil on both these levels.

A study of the Church’s history, with the great persecutions and wars over the centuries, gives quick evidence of supernatural forces at work. How else explain, for instance, the hatred of Nero for Christians, the hatred of the French Revolution for Christianity, the hatred of Hitler for Judeo-Christianity, or that of Communism for religion?

In addition, and perhaps even more importantly, this upheaval will occur on the personal level of each Christian’s life. It is an amazing truth that the greatest part of the of the visible universe is not the grand cosmos, or even the vast scope of history, but *man himself*, the individual human soul. Man is the high point of creation, the “Sixth Day” culmination of all God’s work. The divine work of restoring man in the new creation will entail for each Christian a personal battle and struggle that will be perplexing, dismaying, and difficult. “*That day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth.*”

But understanding what is taking place through the upheavals, the Christian is prepared for that day, and when the trial comes upon him, he does not “die of fright,” but is able to stand erect, raising his head on high in joy and peace, confident in the strength of the Resurrection. Jesus urges his followers to prepare

constantly for the spiritual battle through vigilant prayer, seeking him who “*comes in a cloud with power and great glory.*” In other words, through prayer keeping our hearts and lives focused on the mystery of his Resurrection and Ascension, where the Old has already been renovated in the New. Jesus urges us to “*pray that you have strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent,*” something we do for instance every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer: “*lead us not into temptation*”; i.e., “*subject us not to the trial.*”

Calamity can come upon people on the personal level via the cosmos (a natural disaster for instance); via history (a war or persecution); via personal circumstances (a failed marriage or other falling out); via illness or sudden loss of a loved one; or in many other ways. All of a sudden, one’s life is turned upside down, there is great loss and profound disorientation. The saints show us how faith in Christ becomes a sure anchor during such times.

Some examples of this include the great martyrs of the early Church, such as Perpetua and Felicity, who entered the arena in such calm and strength people were amazed. They had been fortified in prison with visions of Christ in power and great heavenly glory. Other examples include the great martyrs of the modern Church, such as Maximilian Kolbe, who likewise stood erect and lifted his head in the horror of Auschwitz death camp, an unbelievable hell on earth. Other examples likely include people we know, whose lives were marked by great sufferings and trials, yet whose spirits were pure and filled with the peace of God.

Advent is a time when we remember “*a woman, about to give birth*” (Rv 12:1,5) and prepare for Christmas in Bethlehem. During Advent, in a few days, we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the great feast in honor of that Woman about to give birth, “*clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars*” (Rv 12:1). Revelation describes the great cosmic battle unleashed by Christmas (Rv 12:7-17).

During Advent, let us lift up our heads and stand erect with the saints, who encourage and show us the way. Let us not dissipate our time through useless “*carousing and drunkenness,*” – escapism – but rather be sober and disciplined in prayer, seriously spiritual, for the trials and upheavals in life. These are not occasions for dismay, but portend the coming of the Lord.