

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Malachi 4.1-2)

Burning like an Oven

Each year the Church takes the end of the liturgical season to remind us that the Day of the Lord is coming. This 'Day of the Lord' has several different levels.

In the Old Testament, it was the great and terrible day, pictured in ever more cataclysmic cosmic images, when the Lord would come to set right all injustice. In today's world, this would be some upheaval! Rags to riches, riches to rags, slumdog millionaires, emperors wearing no clothes!

Then Jesus came, declaring that the Kingdom was at hand, that the Day was dawning. And so it did, at the Hour of Jesus, completed on the first Easter Sunday, when the world and life were changed for ever.

Yet in another sense, at another level, the Day is still to come. Christians are different from every other people, in that we live in expectation, in the knowledge that, at some time, everything will be brought to completion. The sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. Christ will hand over the Kingdom to his Father, having put all things under his feet, even the last enemy, death. Whatever these images mean, that is the shape of history.

Question:

How do you imagine the Day of the Lord?

Second reading:

(2 Thessalonians 3.7-12)

Preparing for the Day of the Lord

In his earlier letter to the Thessalonians, Paul had warned them that the Day would come 'like a thief in the night', like an unexpected trap suddenly sprung, the dreaded roadside bomb. The recipients of the letter seem to have been so panicked that some simply downed tools and sat waiting.

So now Paul chides that anyone who does not work should not eat either. This charge does not refer only to earning our bread and butter; it is also symbolic.

Paul himself, after all, both earned his bread and butter by his leather working and set the fire of the gospel alight all around the eastern Mediterranean. In all his writings, he is acutely aware of the pressure from the end point, although he has no idea when it will come.

We don't get any nearer perfection, or any nearer the state in which we would like the Lord to find us, simply by sitting and waiting. Even those who are chair bound, and can indeed only sit and wait, can at the same time mightily advance the Kingdom by bringing the light and joy of Christ to their surroundings.

Question:

What should we do to prepare for the Day of the Lord?

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Gospel:

(Luke 21.5-19)

Perseverance

Luke was writing his Gospel after the devastation of Jerusalem by the Roman armies in 70 AD, and the way he frames the words of Jesus suggests that he had witnessed the devastation. Massive blocks of stone, thrown down from the walls, are still lying there as they fell, scattered at the base of the Temple.

The message of this passage is, then, the same as Paul's: the end is sure, but is not yet. Jesus prepares his followers for what is to come before the cataclysmic finale. He warns against false Messiahs, political leaders or other saviour figures who claim to 'put the world to rights'. His followers will be continually challenged to give an account of their beliefs, harassed and martyred in every age, betrayed by those they thought their friends.

There is a promise that Jesus will give the words and wisdom for reply; there is a promise of protection from real harm; but there is no promise that it will be a quiet and easy life. A constant theme in Luke's Good News is that the followers of Jesus must follow him in his difficulties and trials. Only with like endurance will they keep in his footsteps.

Reflection:

Recall an occasion on which the Lord gave you wisdom beyond your own.
