

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 33RD. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Daniel 12: 1-3 Psalm 16 Hebrews 10: 11-14,18 Mark 13: 24-32

By: *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

I was reading a newspaper recently on a park bench and was approached by a young couple who both carried bibles and wanted to talk to me about the coming end of the world. They got my attention! I admired their missionary zeal (wish our church had more of it) and their sincerity, so we talked. Using quotes similar to today's first and third readings, I was given the “key” to understanding when all this was going to happen. At the end of last year and the beginning of this, the new millennium also had a lot of people talking about dates, times and portents. I must admit the scare of the Y2K computer virus had me running for help and filled me with a sense of dread as the new year approached. What would happen to my own world, so carefully constructed and stored on my hard drive? The young couple in the park were sure it was all about to end—everything. Well, as I glanced at the headlines of the newspaper I was reading, I longed for the end too—and end to all that the suffering. I longed for a final peace to be declared----forever.

Today's first and third readings are pieces of apocalyptic literature. They may prove distracting for those who claim to have a "bible code" with an ability to determine dates and times when the cataclysmic events portrayed in the readings will occur. All this preoccupation with trying to figure out when all this will happen is really a distraction because apocalyptic readings in the scriptures are meant to be a consolation, not a means to predict events or scare people about what lies ahead.

If there is a misreading of the intention of the literature, maybe we preachers have no one else to blame but ourselves. After all, when was the last time any of us dared preach on apocalyptic themes like the ones we have today in our liturgy? Why do we leave such preaching to fundamentalist preachers who use these texts to frighten and confound? If we have been paying attention to the scriptures these past Sundays, we might have noticed how many apocalyptic images pervade both Hebrew and Christian testaments, e.g., "Son of Man", resurrection, the return of Christ, the reign of God, the angel holding the seal of God, etc. Shouldn't we serious preachers face this particular form of biblical literature and use it as a way of helping ourselves and our hearers interpret our world and be strengthened in our hope?

The writers of this genre of literature are writing in a time of collapse, persecutions, loss of ideals, despair and faith under duress (sound familiar?) that characterized the 200 years prior to and after the birth of Christ. Writers from both testaments found it necessary to offer assurances and comfort to the faithful: good will triumph, God will reign, evil will be finally overcome. This message needs to be reaffirmed for our time, not as a way of putting off doing anything about the problems in our world, but as a way of reassuring us when we don't see a lot of results from our labors. God has not abandoned us and will bring to completion what God has promised and what we are working so hard to bring about.

It sounds like the author of Daniel is writing about the future; but the present is the main concern. The Book of Daniel is intended to strengthen the faith of Jews in the 2nd. century (B.C.E.) and encourage them to stay faithful to the teachings of their ancestors, rather than turn to the attractive "modern" philosophies and lifestyles of their day. The author lived in a time when Greeks ruled over Israel, and they were attempting to unify the world of their conquests by establishing their culture and political system everywhere they ruled. In Israel, it was a crime to practice Judaism and people were killed for their faith (cf.. 1 & 2 Maccabees). Thus, the author in today's selection is offering an optimistic view of the future. Justice will triumph, and even those seemingly overcome by death will rise. (We have here the earliest reference in the Bible to the resurrection of the dead.)

The Gospel selection is also an example of apocalyptic writing. Like the first reading, this is not a prediction of the future, but an attempt to help the suffering Christian community for whom Mark was writing, keep faith and be comforted by the assurance that God will bring victory in the future. Mark's Gospel stresses that with Jesus' death, a final age had started, and the end was near. When the temple was destroyed in the year 70, it looked like the end was about to happen. When it didn't, the next gospels (Matthew and Luke) had to rethink the Parousia; it wasn't to happen as soon as Mark expected.

Mark, like us, was waiting for Christ to come "with great power and glory" to bring an end to suffering and oppression. All that Christ taught about the forgiveness of sins, his authority, the promise of life, the victory over evil, and the triumph over death, would be accomplished. For Christians still engaged in the struggle, this glimpse into the assured future must have been very helpful and encouraging.

Each generation must deal with this teaching about the end of the world, or worlds, we have known. We already have had many endings in our lifetime. We don't have to be morbid or pessimistic about how things will end, but reflecting on the end of the world may help put things in perspective. I heard someone pray at mass this morning, "Thank you God for this day." I think that person sees things in the perspective of this gospel, appreciating the present in the light of the future. The world will end, but how are we now living in it? We are invited to welcome each moment, live it fully, grow in love for God and others. Jesus says that we don't know what hour will be our last--- so let this hour be important. We Americans live so much in the future, we plan how things will be when we get out of school, settle into a job, marry, retire, get the kids through school, etc. We need to look and plan for the future, but we cherish "this hour" and God's presence to us now with all the opportunities this moment offers us.

The fig tree is used as an example, and it stirs us memories for me. I remember my grandfather's two fig trees in his backyard in Brooklyn. After they bore fruit, their leaves would fall off and the trees would look dead. He would cut back the branches, tie up the trimmed trees and wrap them in black tar paper to protect them from the winter cold. They looked dead, wrapped in black tar paper, as if in shrouds. Miracle of miracles, each spring, once they were unwrapped, they would sprout new branches, grow leaves and by August we would have another harvest of dark succulent figs again.

Maybe that's why Jesus uses the fig tree as an example of the coming of the Son of Man. Ancient civilizations considered the fig tree a symbol of peace and fruitfulness. In hot climates it provided abundant shade from the heat and was a rich source of food. It's growth in Spring was seen as a sign of the coming of summer and a promise of fruit at harvest time. Mark sees the struggles in faith of his community and the accompanying persecutions they suffered as a sure sign of the harvest that was coming when Christ would return.

Jesus seems to be saying it is useless to wonder about when all will be finalized. The passage calls for the community to stay alert. It must have been a comfort to those who were suffering for their faith. They had the kinds of questions believers have always pondered--why must good people suffer? Why do they get sick? Why does a child die? Why is the world so violent towards the innocent? Why doesn't an all-powerful God do something to change the way things are? If God

loves us, why must we suffer so? Doesn't our faith in Jesus mean anything in God's eyes? Both Daniel and Mark are reminders to our faith that God has promised to be with us no matter what we must suffer and to bring to completion the victory promised us today.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Joseph G. Allegretti, *LOVING YOUR JOB, FINDING YOUR PASSION: WORK AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE*. New York: Paulist Press, 2000, 192 pages, paper, \$14.95.

This book was written for working people, to help them see their work in the light of spirituality.

But it is an excellent book for the preacher, to help us relate people's working lives to their inner lives. It has lots of insights for the preacher, good reflective questions, and recommendations for further reading in this neglected area of spirituality and work.

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org