

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 33RD. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

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

By: *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

The liturgical year is winding down and you can hear it in the readings; their tone has changed. They speak of "a time unsurpassed in distress" (Daniel); Jesus, the high priest, is waiting until "his enemies are made his footstool" (Hebrews) and the Son of Man's return will be preceded by days of tribulation when, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from the sky and the power in the heavens will be shaken" (Mark). To me these readings sound both scary and hopeful.

Scary---because we are told that the celestial order and established human institutions will collapse. "Tribulation" will precede the return of the Lord; there are predictions of a painful period with dire consequences. Hard and shattering times are coming. If I have placed my confidence and future on what will eventually disappoint, even crumble, then I had better make some major shifts pretty soon, while there is time. It takes powerful imagery and strong language to shake us up enough to get us to make necessary changes in the daily pattern of our lives. While I may not live to see the grand ending and return of Jesus in glory, as these readings foretell, nevertheless, they do remind me that my life has limits. In that stark light I do need to evaluate where I have made investments of my time and efforts and, if necessary, make the needed changes. The readings are sobering, they mean to shake up any complacency and pry us from misplaced confidences.

But the readings also sound a note of hope. They say things will not always be the way they are now. The evil ones of the world, who thrive on the backs of the vulnerable, will not, in the end, succeed. God has an eye for "the elect" and when the "Son of Man" (and the meaning here is more the "Son of Humanity") returns, he will gather them. There are shepherding sounds in this "gathering" image—the Good Shepherd has promised not to lose any of his sheep, and it is this Shepherd who is coming to fulfill his promise.

The Daniel and Marcan literature is apocalyptic. Their communities must have been in dire straits. For example, 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 the Greeks were over Israel and were attempting to unify the world of their conquests by establishing their culture and political system everywhere they ruled. In Israel, for example, 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 Marcan author is also writing for a persecuted community of believers. They are suffering under the harsh repression of the emperor Nero and Mark's community would recognize the images and language he is using. They would recall that the prophets had foretold the coming of the "Day of the Lord" as a catastrophic event when all would break down into chaos and all established patterns and order crumble. The mysterious "Son of Man," who will follow the cataclysmic events, would make sure his "elect" are "gathered." All was in the hands of God and the One who had created the world out of the primeval chaos and darkness would recreate it as well. All would happen in God's good time. "But that day or hour, now one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

As with Daniel, we know that Mark isn't being predictive. He is not concerned about spectacular events in the future. Rather he wants to stir up a moral or ethical response in his hearers for the present. He isn't as concerned about events that will happen in the skies as he is about more down-to-earth matters. Rather than scan the heavenly horizon, we are called to look over the landscape of our lives. Mark's intention isn't to frighten us into submission, but to give us hope and confirm the lasting value of our good efforts. He will have achieved his purpose if we are encouraged to continue in our work for the Lord. In addition, those of us who have been faithful to our Christian vocation, will be prepared for the Lord's return in whatever way and time it happens. We do not know "the day or hour," so we continue on the path Jesus has shown us; being a faithful community that witnesses to God's love and concern for all, especially the least.

As this liturgical season winds down, the readings urge us to take stock of how things are in our lives: everything in order? If not, why aren't we doing something

about it? Are our energies expended for what will last, or are we frittering away our time on what "rust or moth will consume?" Modern life has much that preoccupies us and keeps us from examining the course of our lives and the future consequences of our present actions. The scriptures remind us today that if we are living totally in the present moment, without considering the long-term meaning of our lives, then only disappointment and collapse await us.

These readings reveal God's purpose and final plan for us. War will not have the last word; poverty will not raise a final triumphant fist; racism and sexism will not, after all is said and done, dance a victory jig together; oppression, in all its hideous guises, will not have a lasting foothold over the vulnerable. Perpetrators of evil will not prevail. But we have a role to play in God's designs, the vision we hear in God's word today involves our participation. It is clear from the overall scriptural evidence: God chose prophets to call people back to just living and the cause of righteousness. Jesus did similarly when he called disciples to go out to announce the peaceable kingdom; heal people's hurts and reconcile enemies. It's clear the apocalyptic vision embodied in today's scriptures is no mere "pie in the sky" dream. Rather, we are assured that God is at work among us to help bring the dream to fulfillment. Apocalyptic literature may sound like it is about the future, but in reality, it is about the way things are in the present—or at least should be. God's designs for us are for our benefit; the present ordeals will not overcome us. We are assured that in the battle between good and evil--- good will triumph. So, we are invited to stand firm on the side of what is right and we are encouraged to know that God stands with us in the same place.

Mark's opening image of darkness is not an unfamiliar phenomenon for some people. Many people have known this darkness in their own lives when their world collapses: when a loved one dies much too young; a career is unexpectedly terminated; an affliction takes away good health and vigor; a loved one walks away from a relationship, etc. We have known such darkness and endings. We have also seen the good suffer; a health care facility close for lack of funds; a drug treatment center lose community support; military budgets eat up money previously meant for schools and programs for the needy. Yes, we have known darkness and endings. As did the Christians for whom Mark wrote. They had experienced evil forces snatch Jesus from them and scatter their fragile community. So, the talk of darkness is nothing new to believers. In fact, it is an unfortunately all too common experience.

But what is reassuring is the "then" in the passage. "THEN they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory...." That's the good news Mark has for us today--- we will see the "then"—the time when One with power comes to gather the faithful. Believing and hoping in this promise, we turn our attention back to the work at hand: preaching the gospel through our words and deeds—even in darkness. For we believe the light is coming, who knows where or when? But he is coming.

QUOTABLE

It is not easy to start on Tuesday with the scriptures and commentaries. But we should. It is not easy to read, read, read, and take notes or clip items, but we should. We hear, with some dismay, of a few Protestant preachers who devote an allotted portion of time each week for various kinds of reading--fiction, biography, theology, poetry. Now I would add science and contemporary affairs. We should love reading and practice the art of listening as we read.

We must build up a good homiletic tradition. Stop treating the homily as an extra, a disposable item. Believe in the power of the word to deliver you and those who hear it into the presence. This means the word proclaimed, the word preached, the word prayed and welcomed. When have you last heard the old reproach, "You didn't give us the word"? If all this sounds more like the Protestant tradition of worship than the Catholic, we must stop thinking that way. Of course we have the Eucharist, we know that. But we have united at least on biblical preaching, the cycle of scripture readings, and the place of the word.

--Joseph T. Nolan, in *THE WORLD, THE CHURCH AND PREACHING*

JUSTICE NOTES

It may seem at times that the church is meddling in affairs which it should leave alone. And I will not defend the details of every statement the church has made about public life. But your question goes beyond specific disagreements and questions CST [Catholic Social Teaching] in principle.

One of the contributions of Vatican II to CST was to place the social mission on firm theological foundations. You can find the position in *Gaudium et Spes*. The basic framework of the argument made by the bishops moves in four steps:

1. The council fathers state that the church ““is at once a sign and a safeguard of

the transcendence of the human person” (#76). This commitment to human dignity has religious significance since it is rooted in a religious claim about the mystery of creation. The biblical account of Genesis tells us that each human being is made in God’s image.

2. At the same time, we must be able to fulfill this charge of being ““a sign and a safeguard”” without the church becoming simply another humanitarian organization or one more social welfare agency. Our mission is not political but religious, to be of service to the reign of God.

3. By emphasizing the religious mission of the church there is no attempt to dismiss the importance of earthly life. The power of God’s reign must reach out to transform all aspects of human existence; it must not be reduced to some otherworldly realm apart from our temporal lives.

4. Therefore, political, social and economic consequences flow from pursuit of the church’s religious mission. The bishops cite four areas where the religious mission spills over into social concerns: commitment to the defense of human dignity, promotion of human rights, fostering unity among members of the human family, and discerning the deeper significance of human work and activity (see *Gaudium et Spes*, # 40-43).

In sum, while the church must transcend every political system because of its religious mission it must still engage the social order due to the implications its religious mission has for temporal life.

—from the webpage of the Office of Social Justice, Archdiocese of St. Paul, Minneapolis

IN ADDITION:

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has published its quadrennial statement on voter responsibility. Called “Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility,” the document outlines a prudent and effective approach to political issues that deeply affect our society. The document can be found on the web at : [Http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/index.htm](http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/index.htm),

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about

them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Ted Prevatte #0330166 (On death row since 2/22/99)
- Raymond Thibodeaux #0515143 (3/2/99)
- Lyle May #050028 (3/18/99)
- Carlette Parker #0311386 (4/1/99)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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