

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – November 13, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Sat., 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 700 words

“Priest of God: celebrate this Mass as if it were your first Mass, your last Mass, your only Mass.” Those beautiful words are found on the walls of many sacristies throughout the world, reminding the priest, as he prepares for Holy Mass, of the reverence and focus with which he should approach the altar. Each and every Mass is important; no Mass is to be celebrated casually. Yet these words also highlight another important truth: Christ comes to us sacramentally at Mass, but there is a time when we will no longer encounter him veiled under a sacrament; rather, we will see him face-to-face. One of these days, each one of us will attend – or in my case, celebrate – his or her last Mass. We will receive Christ in the Eucharist for the last time. And then we will see him as he is.

The second coming of our Lord is an urgent matter, and we can hear that urgency in this Sunday’s readings. Hear how the Lord puts a damper on the polite conversation of those people in today’s gospel. We can picture them browsing in the temple, admiring its beauty; today they would have digital cameras and there would be a tour guide speaking to them through a listening device. Christ listens to their conversation and then enters in rather like a bucket of cold water, saying: “All that you see here – the days will come when there will not be left a stone upon another...”. It must have been quite a jolt for them to hear that!

The Lord then goes on to speak of some of the signs of the end: there would be deceivers, wars, insurrections, civil wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, not to mention some types of meteorological phenomena, persecutions, martyrdoms, and betrayals. Perhaps we should add “presidential elections” to the list. In any event, Christ qualifies all of these things with the often-overlooked words, “But it will not immediately be the end”. This explains why we have seen these phenomena happen throughout history. In what era have there not been natural disasters, persecution and martyrdoms, wars, and deceivers? It is the story of history, and the Lord prefaces that story with, “But it will not immediately be the end”.

Nevertheless, there has never been any shortage of prophets of doom in the world, each one of them thinking that he has the definitive interpretation on contemporary events. Many of them have “ministries” which are, in fact, sources of great personal profit. These people tend to specialize in selectively reading both the word of God and the signs of the times, creating anxiety in those who heed their message. They lead many people to waste time worrying about a future which is based on mere speculation and not necessarily connected with reality.

This irrational worry about the future can cause us – and does cause many – to miss the present. It is a tendency that exists in all of us to one degree or another: some of us have it under control; some of us are trying to gain control over it; and some of us are being controlled by it. The prophets of doom are always standing by to play into those tendencies and capitalize on our fear. This could very well be my last Mass – and yours: we simply do not know. Thus, we must live ready for that moment, whenever it might come, for as our Lord also said elsewhere in the gospel, we know neither the day nor the hour. And as he said in today’s reading: “See that you not be deceived”.

And so it is that those words directed to the priest could easily be re-worked to apply to us all as well. Perhaps each one of us should have a little placard on the bathroom mirror that we could look at and think on every day while getting ready: “Man (or woman) of God: live this day as if it were your first day, your last day, your only day”. We need not fear the future and so miss the present moment; if we live today well and in God’s grace, then the future will take care of itself.