

Sunday Homily

SECOND SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT

14 NOVEMBER 2021

YEAR B

"... the end is still to come."

Mark 13:7

Illustration

A favourite subject of cartoons is the man wearing a sandwich board which boldly proclaims, "The end of the world is nigh." The caption generally refers to him taking out an insurance policy or booking a holiday – anything to show that he does not really believe the message he is carrying around the streets. "The end of the world" has become a standing joke, only believed in by members of weird sects.

From time to time, groups of such people gather together to await the end of the world as we know it. Very often, they have calculated the exact time from a biblical text, taken out of context. Apocalyptic writings, such as Daniel or Revelation, have always provided fertile ground for the imagination. Yet the dates pass, and the world remains.

Gospel Teaching

In today's Gospel, Jesus mentions the destruction of the Temple, and his four closest disciples ask for the sign that will precede this calamity. His reply shows that he has read their minds: they are not asking merely about the destruction of a building, but about the end of time. Jesus knows that they have been influenced by prophecies of the end time found in their Hebrew scriptures.

To a first-century Jew, it seemed perfectly logical to connect the destruction of the Temple with the end of time. The Temple was the very heart of Jewish religion, culture and politics, the embodiment of their national identity. If the Temple were to be destroyed, then the world itself must be coming to an end. In a similar way, the 11th September terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in 2001 seemed an assault on American, even "Western", civilisation. A building can represent much more than bricks and mortar.

The Temple was indeed destroyed, in AD 70, yet the world did not end. The reply Jesus gives to his disciples is the same encouragement we give to someone whose world seems to be falling apart: "Don't worry. It's not the end of the world." Before the end, he says, there will be catastrophes: wars, earthquakes, famines. But these are not to be understood as signalling the end. They are, rather, signs of this age: of a world which still flouts God's will, channelling vast amounts of

money into war, which could be used to support agriculture in the developing world or build homes away from fault lines.

When Jesus spoke about the stones of the Temple being thrown down, he was quite probably not making any specific forecast about its destruction. He was almost certainly not talking about the end of time. He was replying to the awe in which the disciples held the Temple building itself. For Jesus himself, not the Temple, is now the embodiment of God's dealings with his people; his is the new priesthood. He was reminding them that buildings come and go, national institutions come and go, but God remains for ever. In God's good time, this age will end, and he will make all things new: there will be a new creation, a new birth. But it is not for us to know the day or the hour.

Application

The preoccupation with visible signs of organised religion remains today. It is too easy to think of "church" as the building in which we gather on a Sunday, rather than as the body of Christ, the people of God. It is too easy to invest all our religious feelings in this building, rather than in the life that it represents. We are called to be living stones in the temple of which Christ himself is the cornerstone.

For the end of the age starts now, as we live out the teaching of Jesus in the world, loving God and loving our neighbour. Rather than bother ourselves with calculating dates, rather than look for signs, let us simply accept that the end will come in God's good time. Our Saviour will come again in glory. Until then, our best preparation for the end is to heed the hymn's advice and live each day as if it were our last. Jesus spoke of those catastrophes as the beginning of the birth pangs of a new creation; we can act as midwives, helping the world through its pain and working towards the joy which it promises, however long the labour may turn out to be. For the end, like the best, is yet to come.