

Homily - Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More NYC
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1st Sunday of Advent Year C

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

The lead article in today's New York Times Magazine Section is entitled, "The Insect Apocalypse." The author relates how he was biking through the woods with his young son, when suddenly he realized, he was not swallowing any bugs. It's not that he missed the taste of bugs. Rather, he remembered that as a child when he used to go biking, he had to keep his mouth closed to avoid swallowing them. He recalled also how his parents regularly had to remove the carcasses of dead bugs that had slammed against the windshield of the family car. But, no more. Where have all the bugs gone? These pollinators of the ecosystem upon which our food supply depends are slowly dying off. And that is not a good sign.

The word "apocalypse" and its adjectival form "apocalyptic" have sadly become part of our current vocabulary to describe any natural event of cataclysmic, or as news commentators say, of "Biblical proportions. So, the disastrous fires in California, the torrential rains and devastating floods in the South, the increased melting of the polar icecaps with the rise in sea levels, the evident signs of global warning are all couched in "apocalyptic" terms—all signs" of the coming end of the world. Isn't that what most people think "apocalyptic" means? Probably, so. People think that way, no doubt, because of today's Gospel and similar passage in the Bible. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the waves and the sea. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken." Is Jesus really speaking of the "end of the world?" He says in another place that His listeners will actually see these things take place, but the "end of the world" has not taken place. So, what does He mean?

Today we have the expression, "The sky is falling" to indicate a belief that disaster is imminent. Of course, no one takes the words literally, just as no one took the words of Jesus in this case literally either. But it does indicate that something is terribly wrong in the world—the former certainties that people relied upon have been shaken; the center does not hold; everything is up for grabs; what is there to believe in anymore? The sky is falling. This is what Jesus is speaking about—not a distant "end of the world," but a coming actual historical event that will shake the Jewish nation to its foundation.

Jesus is warning His disciples to get ready, because an end is coming, but it's not the end. Still, there's no avoiding it. He is referring to the coming destruction of the city of Jerusalem, and of the Temple itself, which in physical terms was the largest religious edifice in the Mediterranean world, and which in a spiritual sense was the place that housed God's very presence. How could something so terrible ever happen? The sky is indeed falling. Jesus is aware of the mounting violence in His society and of the people's increasing resentment against the Romans that will lead to the Jewish revolt less than forty years later. He is warning His disciples not to get caught up in this vortex of violence that will lead eventually to the destruction of their nation.

This warning is what the word "apocalypse" really means, i.e., an "unveiling," a "revealing" of what is really going on in the world. It is a disclosure of the violence that is at the core of every society. One way it shows itself is to imagine God as a God of violence who rains down wrath upon evil-doers. For Jesus, the One Whom He calls, "Father" is a God of mercy and compassion. It is not the case that we are punished for our sins, but rather we are punished by our sins. It is an "unveiling" of violence which pits one against another, whereby accidental qualities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation become "markers," allowing the more powerful to disparage the less. "Apocalypse" unveils the futility of using force as the solution for problems, as it only escalates to more violence.

Jesus warns His disciples not to get mixed up in the revolutionary atmosphere that was all around them. He says, "Be vigilant." Recognize what's going on. And most importantly, "Pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent." Keep your distance. His disciples were able to do precisely that. Because they did not take arms against the Romans, they were viewed by their fellow Jews as "traitors" to the revolutionary cause. The revolt was doomed from the start, but fanaticism, resentment and hatred fueled their passion for revenge.

These same words are given to us this first Sunday of Advent as we begin our preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth. How do we hear the words of Jesus, "Beware your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life." How do we keep our focus amidst the whirl of holiday parties and the pressure of Christmas shopping? Often Christmas runs the danger of being reduced to two things—either the sentimentalism of "Me and the Baby Jesus," or the pursuit of "consumer bliss" in the celebration of crass commercialization. How, then, do we keep our focus on what the Christmas story is all about?

The story of Bethlehem presents in a nutshell some of the themes that will be "unveiled" when the Child Jesus grows to adulthood—those same themes about

warning the disciples to separate themselves from those who rely on violence. The presence of the legion of angels singing "Peace on earth" stands in stark counterpoint to Caesar's legions who impose the "Pax Romana" (Peace of Rome), of which the Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote in describing the conquest of Britain, "They create a wasteland and call it 'peace.'" The shepherds, the outcasts of the day, are the first to welcome the Christ Child. Those who are not clinging to their vested interests are the ones most prepared to greet the Savior. These are not necessarily the themes celebrated in this "holiday season."

The words of today's Gospel warn us to be vigilant, to be alert, to be aware of the forms that violence takes in our society. The growing disparity of income between the top 20% and everyone else may well lead to expressions of violence beyond the rage and resentment expressed in the last presidential election. We have seen the greatest redistribution of wealth in decades—not a matter of money trickling down, but of money vacuumed up. The messenger may not have been the best, but the fears and anxieties he played on were quite real. We see it happening in Europe, in Brazil, in the Philippines already: the increasing distrust of democracy, the rise of demagogues, and a reliance upon "illiberal democracy," where the majority presumes it can impose its will upon despised minorities. The rapacious plundering of the planet and the pollution of the environment will lead to climate change causing droughts and coastal flooding that will create an even greater displacement and migration of peoples than we have witnessed already. The drought that preceded the Civil War in Syria was likely the worst in 900 years. Jesus advises His disciples, "Read the signs of the times." What kind of world will we leave for our children and grandchildren to inherit? It has been said that "it is a wise people who plant trees in whose shade they will never sit," i.e., who provide for the future rather than short term goals. There is very little of that wisdom around us today.

Still we should not lose hope because Jesus says, "when these things begin to happen, your redemption is near at hand." It is when our faith makes us aware of the violence, of the injustice around us, when we wake up from the drowsiness imposed by the numbing and dumbing media culture we imbibe, then we become aware of what our faith in the risen Jesus is all about. Then people of faith can come forward to make a difference. This is the "apocalypse" for which we give thanks in the Eucharist—not a dire prediction of the end of the world, but the "lifting of the veil" that enables us to see the Light that shines in the darkness, and darkness cannot overcome it. Then we can become the "light of the world."