

My friends, Peace to you. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and the beginning of a new liturgical year. As with the secular new year, the new liturgical year marks a new beginning for a lot of things Church related. It marks a new beginning for our spiritual lives, a time for us to evaluate and strengthen our commitment to God and His Church. And as a Church there are several programmatic things to assist you in this. For example I am re-launching my website, Working To Beat Hell.org this week (yes, that was a shameless plug). There are several opportunities to engage in prayer, including celebration of the sacraments and retreats. There are advent booklets that provide ideas that you can do as an individual or with your family and friends available in Church. And in our Liturgy, we are transitioning from the Gospel of Mark to the Gospel of Luke.

What might startle you a little bit, though, is that as we begin this new year, as we enter into Advent to prepare ourselves for the coming of our savior, we receive from the Church this very apocalyptic Gospel passage. Rather than dealing with the beginning, we are dealing with the end times. Well this is curious, isn't it. I mean, you'd think we would get something a little more light-hearted and uplifting for the first week of Advent.

But instead, the Church gives us this harsh, apocalyptic reading. Rather than a comforting story that fits in with the Christmas carols we hear at the mall or on the radio, we hear Jesus say, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay...People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." What Jesus is predicting is a reversal of the creation. In the book of Genesis, God creates order from chaos, He distinguishes day from night, sea from land. He places Adam and Eve in a peaceful garden. But here we have the seas rising up, nations in tumult, and the order of the heavens and earth disturbed. So what are we to make of this?

Well, let me suggest this: what the Church is reminding us is that Advent is not simply about memorializing the first coming of Christ, but also of preparing for the second coming, where, as the prophet Jeremiah tells us in the first reading, Christ will "fulfill the promise made to Israel and Judah." Where Christ will gather all things into himself. In other words, Advent is deeply apocalyptic.

This is something that the earliest Christians instinctively got, they instinctively understood, precisely because they believed the second coming to be immanent. Today, I think most people don't really expect the apocalypse to happen in our lifetime, despite the trendy 2012 phenomenon. And because of this, I think the heart of today's Gospel passage often eludes us. We post-modern people tend to reflect little on the fact the world as we know it is utterly corruptible, and ultimately perishable.

Now certainly we all know that the world we live in is perishable. We see seasons come and go. We see plants grow up, bud beautiful flowers, then wither and die. We marvel at the beauty of the animals that roam the earth, and then after several years, they pass away. And most grimly, of course, we know that our own bodies, will one day fade away. Similarly, we know that political regimes also are subject to this decay. We have seen political regimes come and go through cycles of war and peace. So what does the revelation mean for us? Does it mean we should simply fall into depression?

No. Certainly not. The Gospel, after all is good news, and has a transforming power to it. The truth that nothing here lasts, is indeed liberating for us. What we learn is that everything, whether in nature, politics, economics, or even in our own bodies, passes. Therefore we should not cling to these things, we should not expect to find our ultimate fulfillment in these things. Instead we must look elsewhere.

The problem faced by modernity is that we tend to seek our ultimate fulfillment in perishable things. How many ad campaigns play on this theme? Cadillac commercials say that your car should return the favor when we turn it on. That your car can fulfill you. No it can't. Why? Because cars and all material possessions are only temporary. They break down and corrode away. Oil of Olay and other beauty products tell you that you can prevent your body from decaying and find fulfillment in eternal youth. No you can't. Your beauty or your health, like it or not, are fading away, and your body is moving towards aging and decay. Certain nature religions say that you can achieve nirvana by entering into peace or union with nature. No you won't. Why? Because nature, as we know, is also subject to corruption. Still others claim, "I will find my fulfillment in some political order, in some political system." No you won't. All of politics is temporary and passing.

Now I am not suggesting that we turn away from all possessions, from our bodies and from all systems of politics. No, not at all. That's not what the Church teaches. Those are the heretical ideas of the puritans, the Manicheans and the Gnostics.

What the Church teaches is not that these things are bad, but that they are not the source of our ultimate fulfillment. And therefore we should not treat them as if they were. So for example, is it okay to be green. Certainly. But when "green" becomes our religion, when it becomes the primary lens through which we do all things, then we have a problem. So for example, when married people decide not to have children because it is not "green" then they have put being green over God's command to be fruitful and multiply. And this is precisely where it becomes problematic, because they are putting hope in perishable things.

Instead, Jesus instructs us to look elsewhere. You "will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory," he tells us. He is telling us to look beyond this world. The Good News that Jesus tells us is not that we will be saved from corruption, that this passing world will somehow remain. No, the Good news is that our hope is not tied down to this perishable world. That our hope is in someone greater than these passing forces in our lives. That is where our trust lies. And this is precisely the reason that Jesus tells us, "when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand."

So for us, who place our faith in Christ, the end of the world is not something we fear, because our hope is not in anything of this world. Rather, for us Christians, the end of the world is something we welcome, because it means that our redemption is at hand. The Church, therefore, gives us these apocalyptic readings today to remind us, as we renew our journey of faith, that what we are ultimately seeking is indeed the end of this perishable world, and the beginning of the everlasting life with Christ in the world to come. In the words of the *didache*, the teaching of the 12 apostles, the Church adopts this prayer for advent, "May grace come and this world pass away. Amen. Come Lord Jesus!"