

The Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time B - We Do Not Need to Know When the End Will Come

November 17, 2024.

These words of our Lord were spoken at the very end of his earthly life, just a few days before his crucifixion. His main point is that with his death and resurrection the Old Covenant will end, and the New Covenant, the age of the Church, will begin. This will be the last period of salvation history. In this period, God's saving grace will gradually spread throughout the world, and the powers of evil will desperately, and unsuccessfully, battle against it. And at the end of the age of the Church, Christ will return to bring all human history to its culmination. Exactly when that will happen is shrouded in mystery, no one but the Father knows. What Jesus wants to make sure his Apostles understand is that it will occur, and he wants them to be ready for it at all times. He actually finishes the discourse by saying: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come." (Mark 13:33) We do not know, because we do not need to know. God has seen fit to assure us that history has a purpose, and that it will come to an end, and that we should always keep this in mind. Through the ages, many Christians have become obsessed with the details of how and when this will occur, often neglecting this starting point of the revelation. It is enough for us to know that we are part of a story that has meaning and that it will come to a definitive end, such that the sun and moon and stars will be darkened – the whole order of creation will be transformed. At that time, we will receive just recompense for how we carried out our role in the story. It's that simple, and it's that momentous. The end of this earthly world as we know is actually the beginning of the eternal kingdom God has planned for us all!

Throughout the history of Christianity, some groups have broken away from the Church precisely because they were impatient with our Lord's refusal to give details on this issue. They wanted to be able to determine the exact time and place of Christ's second coming and the end of history. Today, one of the fastest growing heretical sects continues to make this kind of prediction, the Jehovah's Witnesses, also known as the Watchtower Society. It was founded in 1884 by Charles Taze Russell. Since then it has grown to over 6 million members and 91,000 congregations in 235 different countries. Their members commit to 5 weekly hours of door-to-door witnessing, leading a monthly Bible study, and selling a dozen subscriptions to their *Watchtower* magazine every month. Although they use Bibles and claim to be Christians, they deny most of the basic doctrines of the Creed, like the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the reality of grace, and the existence of Hell. One of the characteristic aspects of their doctrine has to do with predicting the end of the world. The Founder, Charles Russell, predicted and prepared for Jesus to come again in 1914. He died, disappointed, in 1916. Many predictions float around, even up to 1989 – all of these predictions were published in *The Watchtower*. It is good for us as Catholics, members of the Church that Jesus himself founded, to be aware of groups like this, who are greatly mistaken in their efforts to follow Christ. We should never let ourselves or our loved ones be deceived by them, and we should do what we can to help lead them back to the Good Shepherd's true flock. We should be grateful that Christ's own Church has preserved the true doctrine: that Christ will come again to bring history to its close, and that we should live every day with that in mind. Pope Francis said, "If we persevere — Jesus reminds us — we have nothing to fear, even in the sad and ugly events of life, even in the evil we see around us, because we remain grounded in the good. Perseverance is the reflection in the world of God's love, because God's love is faithful, it is persevering, it never changes."

Jesus tells us that the end of history will come, but he doesn't tell us when, because he wants us to live each day actively, vibrantly, fully. This is what today's Psalm means when the psalmist writes: "I set the LORD ever before me; with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed." How can we "set the Lord ever before" us? How can we live our daily lives with God "at our right hand" so that we too can live with interior peace, joy, courage, and wisdom? One excellent way to live each day in the light of eternity is to make frequent use of the sacrament of reconciliation. It is no coincidence that as our popular culture has become more consumerist, our confessionals have become dustier. Very often we can't wait to be the owner of the latest technology, be it a car or a phone. But when it comes to receiving the sacraments, we always hesitate and/or make excuses to be absent. The world around us doesn't want us to think about the long-term repercussions of our actions and decisions. It wants us to think about short term pleasures, so that we keep having to buy more and more of them. But when we come into God's house to confess our sins, the seductive noise of the world

around us fades into the background as the Holy Spirit instructs our hearts. And when we bring our faults, failings, and sins to the Lord by confessing them to his ordained priests, he never fails to comfort and liberate us with his unconditional forgiveness, strengthen us for the struggles of every day, and enlighten us with the wisdom that lasts forever. Coming to the sacrament of reconciliation every two weeks or every month is a specific, concrete, and simple way for us to "set the Lord always before" us and to keep him at our "right hand." And if we do that, we will be ready at every moment for the end of the world, whenever it happens to occur. The end time is not meant to frighten or threaten us but to give consolation, hope and encouragement in life's difficulties.

We are on an earthly pilgrimage and have within us deep-seated longings for a better world. At journey's end we are hoping for an everlasting happiness, for a bright dawn to emerge out of our present darkness. We may not know when the end of the world will happen, our own death will be the end of the world for us, and while we cannot avoid a sudden death, we can take steps against an unprepared death by living each day carefully as if it is our last and by keeping God ever in our sights. Nowadays, people don't want to talk much about the reality of hell. But we have to face the fact of hell which is the eternal separation from God who is love. It will be a sad parting, a missed opportunity, but God will always respect our freedom. Again Pope Francis has some advice for us: "Here then is some advice for making important choices.... Before deciding, let us imagine that we are standing in front of Jesus, as at the end of life, before he who is love. And imagining ourselves there, in his presence, at the threshold of eternity, we make the decision for today. We must decide in this way: always looking to eternity, looking at Jesus. It may not be the easiest, it may not be the most immediate, but it will be the right one." We will have no one to blame but ourselves for preventing God from drawing us to eternal life. Very often we heard of people asking for the sacrament of baptism and the sacrament of reconciliation on their death bed. Were these people afraid of hell or did they have an awakening by the Holy Spirit? We would never know. But we know for sure that God the Father is always extending the invitation to come to his vineyard to enjoy eternal life in his Kingdom. Christ comes to us each day, offering us his life and inviting us to his side. The call he makes at death is only the final in a series of approaches. Judgement is happening all the time. If we are carrying God in our hearts wherever we go, heaven will not come as a surprise, but as a full blossoming of the world we have been building for ourselves. In the meantime, we can all check what our relationship with God is like and where our hearts and values lie. When we are in right relationship with God, there is no need to worry or panic, come what may and there is really no need to know when the end will come if we are prepared by our loving Father.