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After a stint of several years in Africa, a European missionary went on a home visit and returned after a few weeks with a fine set of colorful posters that he used to illustrate his sermons. As he had hoped, the pictures proved to be a great success. Each Sunday after the liturgy, many in the congregation would linger around the posters and discuss what they had learned.

One day, near the end of the liturgical year, the missionary chose to preach on the end times and the consequences, both good and bad, that would coincide with Jesus' return as judge and Savior of all. Before the celebration of word and bread, he set up the appropriate poster at the door of the church and then went to prepare for Mass. Before long, he heard whoops of delight and laughter, and he turned around to see his congregation dancing with joy before the poster. Surprised and a little indignant, he called for silence and asked how they could find humor in the prospect of final judgment. "Hell is no laughing matter!" he shouted. Then one of the revelers took his arm and led him to the poster, saying, "Don't you see, Father? Look! All the people in hell are white!"

Initially, this little anecdote may bring a laugh. But beyond its humor, it points to an underlying notion that has been variously expressed through the ages. When human beings are faced with the fact of the great reckoning to end all reckonings, some of

us tend to focus on what might be the outcome for others. The French philosopher John Paul Sartre famously wrote, *L'enfer, c'est les autres* (Hell is other people) — and some of us tend to think *L'enfer, c'est pour les autres* (Hell is *for* other people)! In his *Inferno*, the first part of *The Divine Comedy*, Italian poet Dante Alighieri exercised a similar prerogative in identifying which people would be relegated to which of the circles of hell.

Although the desire to assign places for others in the afterlife may prove tempting, the sacred texts and their authors summon our attention and our energies elsewhere. Do they call us to look within ourselves and find cause to worry about the end times? Do they invite us to forgo criticizing the speck in another's eye while ignoring the beam in our own? Do they urge us against procrastination that keeps us from preparing to welcome Jesus? In some ways, the living word that guides us all through the liturgical year does indeed offer these suggestions. But more importantly, before any suggestion can be taken to heart or any question truthfully answered, the sacred authors direct believers, collectively and individually, to look at God.

Looking at God does not mean that one must seek out the beautiful vision or await a dramatic theophany. Rather, looking at God means taking a cue from our ancestors in the faith, who learned to discern the face of God by remembering all that God had done for them. God was their creator, protector, provider and guide. God was their liberator and champion, their mother, their father, their brother, their breath. God had been their loving, faithful and forgiving spouse. Looking at God created an ambience of truth in which they saw not only God but themselves and the fact that their sins had distorted the image of God they were to reflect. Looking at God also kept them from looking at one another with disdain. On the contrary, looking at God gave them a new prism through which to look at others with eyes of sympathy, appreciation and respect.

As we look at God's face as it has been reflected in our own lives over the past year, we also will probably experience the painful truth that we are not all we should be. Nor have we done all that we could do to reflect to our belonging to God. For that reason, the thought of the Lord's second coming among us may fill us with dread and hopelessness. Nevertheless, we are to leave the judging of ourselves and others to God (Malachi). We are to set aside our fears and speculations; we are not to listen to naysayers or prophets of doom. Rather, we are to persevere in trusting God (Luke). We are also to busy ourselves with the ministry that Jesus has entrusted to

us. Instead of minding the business of others (2 Thessalonians), we are to continue to look at God and struggle each day to give ourselves, our world and all others to God's good keeping.

### **MALACHI 3:19-20**

Ministering during the turbulent period of reconstruction after the exile (ca. 460-450 B.C.), the anonymous prophet later called Malachi ("my messenger") was certain that his people had somehow lost sight of God or were looking for God in the wrong places. Although the infrastructure of Judah was being rebuilt — thanks in great part to the material aid from Cyrus the Persian king and the governor he had sent to oversee the process — the lives of the people of Judah were still in a shambles. Even though the temple and its liturgy were also being reestablished, the prayer life and religious fervor of the community had yet to be renewed.

Without mincing words, Malachi attributed the spiritual malaise to laxity on the part of clergy; sloppy ritual (1:6-2:9); the withholding of tithes (3:8, 10-14); foreign influences that had crept into the liturgy (2:10-16); and the ever-growing discrepancy between the rich and the poor of the land. Malachi was quick to point out the irony that the people who seemed to scorn God and the law were doing very well financially, while the poor and often the most faithful were foundering.

To grab the attention of all and to refocus the eyes of his people on God, Malachi took a harsh tone and warned that on the Day of the Lord, everything would be reversed. First referenced by Amos in the eighth century B.C., the Day of the Lord was traditionally anticipated as a time of joy and blessings for Judah. But Amos (5:18-20) and his prophetic colleagues, including Malachi, prophesied that that day would be one of judgment for Judah as well as the nations. Rather than long for that day, the people would try to hide themselves to escape God's just judgment.

In today's first reading, the Day of the Lord is been described in terms of a blazing oven that will mete out God's justice: an end to the wicked and healing for those who fear God's name. The term "sun of justice," which is more accurately translated as "the sun which is justice," may reflect the influence of the Persians and/or Egyptians, who represented their sun god as a winged solar disk who brought light and, therefore, life to all.

Malachi understood the title “sun of justice” as an appropriate tribute to the God of Israel and Judah, whose face shines with light and life for all people. Centuries later, the authors of the Christian scriptures would apply this title to Jesus, who, as Sun-Son of justice, had come into the world to be its light. This same Jesus who died and rose again will return. On that day, as Malachi has warned, there will be a reckoning that will determine the everlasting future of all. For now, we who believe and hope and wait are to live in the light of God’s justice and truth.

## **2 THESSALONIANS 3:7-12**

A busybody is someone who is both intrusive and nosy and meddles in the affairs of others. The author of 2 Thessalonians regarded those with such a penchant as “disorderly” and certainly not productive members of the community. These, as well as those who were refusing to pull their own weight by working, were proving to be a burden upon an already troubled community. Earlier in this letter, the author refers to the persecution endured by believers (1:4, 6) as well as to the wicked and evil people from whom believers must be protected (3:2-3). With trouble enough threatening the community from without, the ancient writer was quick to try to quell whatever difficulties might arise from within the congregation.

Some of those difficulties stemmed from a misinterpretation of the end times by those who cited the sufferings of the community as a sign that the end was near. Others were of the notion that the end had already come. These misconceptions had led some to take an early retirement, and as a consequence, the community was further burdened by the idleness of some of its members. Some, in their idleness, had become armchair critics who preferred to focus on the shortcomings of others rather than on the coming of the Lord.

To correct these false ideas and the behaviors they fostered, the ancient writer offered the example of himself. Because he was writing for Paul, the author of this second letter to believers in Thessalonica cited the great apostle’s insistence on paying his own way. He could have expected to be supported by those for whom he opened the treasure of the good news. But Paul, a tentmaker, plied his trade so as to support himself; he was adamant in his desire to be financially independent so that no one could call him a slacker. Nor could any demands be made upon him by any benefactor.

Along with the example set by Paul, the ancient writer appealed to tradition. His statement that “anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (v. 10) drew upon similar advice from the Psalter (128:2) as well as Israel’s sapiential literature (Proverbs 6:6-11). Similar advice also appears in the *Didache*, an early Christian instruction manual also called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. There, believers are told, “Everyone who comes in the name of the Lord is to be made welcome ... if he wants to settle down among you, let him find employment and earn his bread ... use your discretion to make sure he does not live in idleness simply on the strength of being a Christian. Unless he agrees to this ... he is only trying to exploit Christ. Be on guard against such as that” (#12).

This advice continues to advise preachers as well as people in the pews to avoid those for whom the Gospel has become a means of lucre rather than a humble, hope-filled way of life.

## **LUKE 21:5-19**

Even today, in the 21st century, there are some who, claiming to be prophets, look to this Gospel and other similar apocalyptic narratives as a timetable by which to predict the end of time, and who interpret those signs that supposedly signal its appearance. Even today, some followers of Jesus use such texts as a “literary bludgeon” to frighten the faithful into submission or to instill in them a fear that might result in their conversion and repentance. However, if the genre of apocalyptic literature is to be correctly appreciated and understood, all of the events described in this Lucan apocalypse have already become the stuff of memory.

By the time the third Gospel appeared in written form in the mid - to late 80s, the temple in all its beauty was no more. It had been destroyed by Titus and his troops in 70, and not one stone stood upon another. Gone, too, was the temple liturgy. Only the synagogues survived as places of prayer. It was in these gathering places that the first followers of Jesus tried to preach in his name the good news of salvation. For their efforts, they were officially expelled.

Handed over to the civil authorities, many died during the persecution under Nero in the 60s; more were perishing at the order of Domitian in the 80s. In the midst of all these struggles, imposters were purporting to be the messiah whose return in glory they awaited. Yet each in turn was proven to be false, and some followers of Jesus had begun to wonder if and when he would ever return.

To allay their fears, bolster their hope and strengthen their resistance, the Lucan evangelist reminded his readers of the promise of Jesus that was ever-present. He urged them to look at Jesus in whom the presence of the eternal God took on flesh and a face that looks with love on those who struggle. Don't be terrified, said Jesus. Don't follow false leaders. Look upon the persecution you will surely suffer for my sake as an opportunity to give testimony (v.13). Scholars suggest that the advice of the Lucan Jesus (v.13) could also be translated as: "You will be called upon to act in a way that witnesses to your fidelity to me" or "to what you really are." If and when that opportunity becomes ours, Jesus has promised to give us wisdom in speaking that our adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute.

Jesus' promise encourages purity of spirit and integrity in his disciples. Disciples do not testify to Jesus with their lips and then live in a manner that contradicts their testimony. To do so is to live a lie that serves no one — not Jesus, not the Gospel, not the community or even oneself.

Jesus has promised that his gift of wisdom will be available to those who are willing to witness to him in truth even when that truthfulness might result in persecution. We, for our part, are to welcome his gift of wisdom, to continue looking first and foremost to God for every good grace, and then to roll with the punches and the pain until he comes again to take us home.

(This commentary was written by Patricia Sánchez and originally published in *Celebration* on November 14, 2010.)

## **Planning: 33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

As we enter into the month of November, a month when we traditionally reflect on death and those who have died, our first reading and gospel focus our attention on death and resurrection. The reading from 2 Maccabees gives us part of the tale of seven brothers and their mother who accepted death rather than renounce their faith.

This story is one of the few passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that reflect a strong belief in life after death. As the fourth brother insists, "It is my choice to die at the hands of men with the hope God gives of being raised up by him ..."

The Gospel passage makes it clear that Jesus believed in life after death. The Sadducees did not, which is why they challenged him in this episode. But he insists: “That the dead will rise even Moses made known in the passage about the bush, when he called out ‘Lord,’ the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”

Surveys show that many people today no longer believe in life after death, and that group includes some Catholics. This is a good month to reaffirm our belief in the resurrection. That may be done as powerfully by our actions as by our words. If we honor those who have died in the past year, for example, we nourish the hope of those left behind that their loved ones are still alive and waiting for them.

Preaching on this belief and prayers that support it are also appropriate, of course. Planners might make a point to include at least one petition each week this month for those who have difficulty trusting in the promise of resurrection.

Planners should also discuss the best ways to remember those who have died. In a small parish with a limited number of funerals each year, the names of those who have died might be included in the petitions, dividing up the list over the four Sundays (or maybe the first three Sundays, since Advent begins on Nov. 27). Parishes with larger lists of deceased might post the names on a poster at each entrance that encourages prayer for them and their families. Some parishes have a “Book of the Dead” in which the names are inscribed each year. Planners should also discern if it would be helpful to have a special evening Mass or prayer service some evening during November that would gather families who have lost someone this year to gather for prayer and mutual support.

## **Prayers: 33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Today’s readings touch again on the future, focusing on the end of time. People have always been fascinated and frightened by dramatic signs and warnings of what is to come. And the signs always seem to be occurring right now. In fact, the warnings are communicated in highly symbolic language. They don’t really tell us when Christ will appear for us. But they keep us on our toes, so that we may live in

readiness for whenever and however he comes.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you taught that your kingdom is not of this earth: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you called people to think beyond the moment: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you promised that those who persevere will be saved: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Aware that signs of the end times are always with us, we pray for awareness of God's loving presence in the here and now.

**Minister** For the baptized and all who believe in a loving God: that we live our convictions each day...we pray,

- For those who spread fear instead of hope and courage, and for all who live in fear...we pray,
- For those who stay focused on the care of others: for first responders, those in helping professions, loving families and friends...we pray,
- For all whose work involves planning for a future that serves the human race...we pray,
- For calm in our national election and for elected leaders who will work for care of the most needy...we pray,
- For a renewed confidence in the power of institutions to benefit the needs of all citizens...we pray,
- For those among us who are suffering in any way, and for our efforts to serve them...we pray,
- For those who have died...(names), for their families and friends, and for those who minister to the grieving...we pray,

**Presider** God who loves and protects all that is, we pray for hope and perseverance in uncertain times. Let our trust in you keep us calm, unafraid, and focused on being the face of Jesus in the world. We pray in the name of him whose presence we watch for each and every day. Amen.

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