

“What are the meanings of signs?”

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, Our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We are at the end of the Church year. In fact, next Sunday, is Christ the King Sunday, which is the last Sunday of the liturgical year.

So, it makes sense that the scriptures for this Sunday address the end of the world and, specifically, what to look for before that happens. We spend so much time planning our worldly future, our next vacations, etc., that we often forget that our own lives in this world will not last forever. Sometimes we miss those signs.

In today's passage from Luke's gospel, we find Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem. He is nearing the end of his earthly life. As he roams about the temple, he hears people around him and sees how awestruck they are by the beauty of the temple. The temple was one of the most impressive buildings in the world at that time. To most Jews it was a place made to last forever.

It was the “soul” of the Jewish faith, just as Rome, the Vatican etc. is for Catholics. So, when Jesus said, “You know all these things that enamor you? The time will come when everything will be destroyed.” Now, those who heard him must have thought he was either completely off his rocker or guilty of blasphemy. But we know now that as it turns out, he was right.

As the result of a rebellion by the Jews against the Romans, the conflict known as the First Jewish, Roman war, Jerusalem WAS attacked and the city and Temple were completely destroyed.

The temple, The Holy of Holies, a place so sacred that only the high priest could enter it and only once a year. The temple was ransacked and the sacred vessels carried off like a pirate's booty... or spoils of war. All that is left of King Herod's mighty monument in Jerusalem today is the “Wailing Wall”.

For many Jews, including the Jews who converted to Christianity, it must have seemed like the end of the world. Early writings of Christianity focused on what to look for, the signs of what they believed was the imminent end of the world and the return of Christ in judgment. In the later writings, you'll find that the focus shifted to how to make the best use of time until Christ actually returns. Anyone who tries to predict Christ's return is either a false teacher, ignorant...or both. While scripture gives us signs, it does not predict.

The purpose of prophecy is to show us that God is in control so that we are not afraid. So that we can have confidence in God. His plan does not center around our comfort, but our hope in our eternal reward. In the passage we just read, Jesus tells His disciples some of the warning signs.

They are things we see happening even in our world today. It is not coincidence. Jesus specifically warns us here about some very real dangers. First, he warns in Luke 21:8 “Watch out that you are not deceived.”

My husband is retired from Law Enforcement. He once told me that when the FBI trains its agents to identify counterfeit money, they are not required to study fake bills. Instead, they undergo a thorough study of genuine currency – how it looks, how it feels. One agent once said, “We get to know the real thing so well, so thoroughly, that it's easy for us to spot the fake.”

The key to knowing falsehood is...knowing the truth. That's why it is so important for us to read it, hear it, study it, and to memorize it. Know it. So, attend Sunday School or Bible Study faithfully. Ask questions. Seek to understand

what you read. We must not fall into Satan's trap. His strategy has not changed. The first thing he did to Adam and Eve was to deceive them. The first thing he did to Jesus when He started His ministry was trying to deceive Him in the wilderness. Our spiritual enemy is still at it today. When Jerusalem was destroyed, the world, as any Jew would know it, was destroyed along with it. We have the same sort of experiences in our lives. We experience the "end" of many things and the "loss" of many people in a lifetime. The physical world as we know it can be destroyed by flood, hurricane, fire or earthquake. The whole earth though does not need to be destroyed, just our little part of it, for us to know what Jesus is talking about. For us to feel like it is the end of the world.

When I lost both of my parents, and my Nana whom I was very close to, within a 2-year span, my world was destroyed and I will admit, it felt for a bit like my world had ended. As with many people, it was the losses in my life that fed my relationship with our Lord. He was waiting for me when I reached out in need.

Our social world can be destroyed by "final" arguments, earthly death of loved ones, divorce, being disowned by family, shunned or being told that you are "as good as dead." so to speak.

Our political world can be destroyed by war.

Our economic world can be destroyed by depression, recession, or unemployment, not to mention famine, hunger, disease and epidemics.

We live in many "worlds," spheres of meaning, and any of them can collapse at any moment.

Our questions are no different today, than the questions of the early disciples: Are there signs of these endings and how can we prepare? The signs are pretty much the same for every generation. These so-called apocalyptic events or signs are really no more than the "normal," part of any age. Wars, pestilence, famine, severe weather, family disunity, religious persecution, are all part and parcel of life. They do cause the "end" of some people's lives- many people in some cases. Think of 9-11. And they do cause the "end" of many people's worlds, as they knew it.

But not THE end of THE world. They can become "signs" of the "End." If they do, if we see their deeper meaning, we can grasp that they are not only sources of grief and pain, but also opportunities for growth and joy. We are tested, by these events. Will we remain faithful to the Lord? Or will we cave in or give up? Will we stop living, loving, growing, giving, when we experience an "end" of the world as we comfortably knew it? Will we cut and run or will we stand up and face the challenge?

Mercifully, Jesus is indicating to his disciples that they will experience the end of Jerusalem, the central symbol of all meaning in a Jewish universe. However, it is not the Big End or the Final End, even though it will seem like it at the time. There is something to be learned from it. In one sense it is a dress rehearsal for the final End. How Jesus' disciples fare, behave, and weather these earlier and relatively minor storms will school them and steel them for future ones and, before all else, the final one. These tragic events really only become "signs of the end" when we perceive them from the viewpoint of eternity and as opportunities to test and try our faithfulness, no matter how evil and painful they are otherwise. There is really only one preparation for these many "ends" in a human lifetime. It is living well, living our daily lives in the presence of God. GOD will prepare us, prepare our defense and protect our essential lives.

A person may be surprised to learn from his or her doctor that he or she has a terminal illness. It is too late then to prepare. The best preparation, of course, would have been a life of regular exercise and a healthy diet. If the person lived that way and still got sick, that person would have a better than average chance of either fighting the disease successfully or of living longer than the ordinary prognosis would estimate. So, it is with all the "ends" of our lives. If we daily take care of today's business and challenges, neither procrastinating nor behaving as if we have all the time in the world, we grow stronger each day to face and live well, in the next day, should another day be given to us. If not, we become progressively less equipped to accept the challenges of ordinary life, let alone the challenges of tragedies and extraordinary events. Perseverance up until the End involves a daily fidelity, not some flashy last-minute resistance.

The “signs,” when they become such for us, are wake-up calls and shake up calls to get us back to what is centrally important about daily life. The “End” of the world is happening all the time in all the little “ends” we experience. Jesus does not predict when the physical world as we know it will end or even if it will end at all. In anyone’s lifetime there are many “ends,” wherein a particular world of meaning ceases to exist. A divorce sees the end of “Happily ever after”. The death of our parents can mean the end of family life. The end of one’s time on earth, one’s physical death, marks an end to these other “ends” and the beginning of living IN the End Time, which never ends.

Confused yet?

The end of our time physically here on earth, ends all these other ends I have mentioned. It also marks the beginning of life in the end time. And the end time we know, because of the grace and love of Jesus, never ends. How one lives and loves daily life, that is, with vigilant fidelity to the Lord, prepares one to face catastrophes, major and minor. These catastrophes, in turn, prepare one to face one’s physical death. Worlds of Meaning: There is not just one world. We live in several “worlds of meaning.” Indeed, every person we know is a “world of meaning.” There was a world where I had no children. Another world after I met my husband Joe 30 years ago. In the course of a lifetime, many, indeed most, of those “worlds” come to an end. It might be the end of a friendship, a relationship, or a marriage.

These are personal “ends,” “personal deaths really, of “worlds of meaning.” These worlds, our worlds are constantly changing. Just as are the non-personal worlds of politics, economics, religion, technology, etc. These non-personal worlds can be as major as a tornado or as minor as a thunderstorm or fog. And, of course, the personal and non-personal worlds interact, overlap, intertwine. We all live in a complex of many worlds, many levels, many dimensions, of meaning simultaneously. They all mean something to us. Even the non-personal worlds still have personal meaning for us. When Jesus singled out Jerusalem as a world about to crumble, he was using the primary symbol of meaning for every Jew. New York and Washington, D.C. are parallel symbols for Americans. Jesus was pointing out that the whole physical world does not have to cave in for people to experience the tremendous killing power evil possesses and can use. He also points out that as bad as such experiences are, they are also opportunities to reshape one’s priorities, revise one’s values, and reform one’s life, before it is too late and one finds oneself at the literal “end of the ends. Yes, there are many worlds of meaning and they end or die throughout our lifetime. They can be seen as devastations only, as causes of depression and despair or they can be seen as challenges, or signs as causes for repair.

We can let the overwhelming feelings of sadness bury us alive or we can rebuild with the final end in mind and live in its light. When we do that, all the other “ends” seem comparatively minor, less fearsome, and more survivable. We experience so many deaths along the way, every day really, that our physical death is really the end of death, the death of death, its conclusion. On the other side of it, is life without death, without disasters, without disappointments, without disease, depression or despair.

Signs: Anyone can point to the apocalyptic signs we find in the Bible- false messiahs, wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, strange events in the skies- and link them up with current events. That is because they happen in every age. They are signs of evil, not of the end of the world, although they do spell the end of the world for many people, but not for all. Billy Graham was called by God to preach the gospel to the world. His calling began right after World War 2. As he toured battered Europe, the damaged buildings were filled with bullet holes and bomb damage. People were seeking hope, peace and answers. The world had just been on the brink of destruction. Nothing was stable and no one was at peace. The result was an unprecedented response to the gospel.

May we see the signs, for just what they are, signs of what could be.
Amen.