Thirty-third Sunday *per annum* Mal 3:19-20a 2 Th 3:7-12
Year C, 2025 Ps 98 Lk 21:5-19

World without end: worlds that end

I want to offer a reflection on the Scripture passages given to us on this thirty-third Sunday of the year, the second-to-last, for next Sunday is the last Sunday in Ordinary Time, the feast of Christ the King. And the Sunday after that is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the liturgical year. It is remarkable, though, how the Church's liturgy for both the end and the beginning of the Church year points to the coming of Christ, albeit in different ways, to the day of the Lord.

In the first reading the prophet Malachi warns of God's impending judgment upon the world, summoning the people of Israel to repentance and to righteousness:

> Lo, the day is coming, blazing like an oven,
> when all the proud and all evildoers will be stubble,
> and the day that is coming will set them on fire,
> leaving them neither root nor branch …
>
> But for you who fear my name, there will arise
> the sun of justice with its healing rays.

The day is coming, Malachi prophesizes, the day of judgment, doomsday. You will remember that I told you some time back that the word doom comes to us from an Old English root meaning

"judgment." So doomsday means judgment day, not necessarily a day of calamity and disaster. For the unrighteous, yes. For sinners, yes. But for those who live in awe of the Lord and seek his ways, the day of judgment will light and justice and healing.

The Lord Jesus, too, speaks about that day:

> the days will come when there will not be left
> a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.

The days will come, Jesus says. And when they come, or rather, before they come, there will be trials and tribulations to be suffered, both in nature and in human culture – natural disasters and human tragedies. The world will end. Or more precisely, *a* world will end.

When the Romans destroyed Temple of Jerusalem in the year 70, some thirty-odd years after the death of Jesus, in retaliation against the non-stop revolt of the Jews, a world ended, and there was not a stone left upon another stone of the temple. *A* world ended, but not *the* world. Likewise, three hundred years later when Christianity was made legal in the Roman empire, *a* world ended, the old pagan world, but not *the* world. Likewise the French revolution in 1789, with all its destructive forces, brought an end to the *ancien régime*, as it was called, the old order. *A* world ended, but not *the* world.

Pick a significant event, historical or personal, and you will see that it is the end of one world and the beginning of another. In the modern age, the telephone, the nuclear bomb, space flight, the Kennedy assassination, the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9-11. Each of these marked the end of an old world and the beginning of a new one. Or on a more personal and intimate level, the death of a parent or of a spouse, a wedding, a divorce, the birth or the death of a child. A world ends. *The days will come.* And a new world begins.

Only two weeks ago we celebrated All Souls' Day, and on that occasion I spoke about the reality of death and how we often try to avoid death by not saying the words "death" or "dying," but by resorting to other expressions and phrases. Along those same lines, it seems to me that Jesus's words in today's gospel are trying to ready us for dealing another reality that we'd rather avoid. Not the death of a person, but the death of the institutions and symbols that have marked our lives, that have served as guideposts for who we are, who we understand ourselves to be, how we belong, and how we make our way in the world.

Consider just the opening lines of today's gospel: "some people were speaking about how the temple was adorned with costly stones and votive offerings." They were admiring the temple, its beauty, its wealth, its imposing size, its immensity, its importance. The temple was the center of Jewish religious life and had been for centuries. It was the center and heart of their national identity, of who they were as a people, as *the* people of God, chosen by God

among all the peoples of the earth to be his own. Hearing this praise of the temple, Jesus says, rather flatly and nonchalantly, "All that you see here – the days will come when there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down." Jesus speaks matter-of-factly. He does not threaten. It's just what will happen, what happens over time. Dynasties decay. Empires crumble. Nations falter and fail. And their monuments are reduced to ruins.

No Israelite alive when Jesus spoke these words could have imagined that only forty years later their temple, the dwelling place of God on earth, would be rubble and they themselves stripped of everything, scattered in exile throughout the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire. It was the diaspora of the Jews. The Jewish State of Israel was no more. Fast-forward another four hundred years, and the Roman Empire itself would fall. Today, as *tourists*, we can visit the ruins of Greece, the ruins of Rome: the splendid amphitheaters, the exquisite aqueducts, the temples and shrines, the coliseums. Once they were the grandest buildings of their age, bustling centers of commerce and leisure, politics and religion, the monuments of an ancient and thriving civic society. Today they are ruins, piles of rock. Fancy rock, but rock all the same.

The Spanish empire once covered most of South America and huge swaths of North America. The British Empire once spanned the globe. Today, Britain and Spain are again small European countries

contained more or less within their historical borders. And here and there across the continents we can visit the remains, in ruins or in others' hands, of their once great monuments and might.

Reflecting thus, do we imagine that our own America, for all its self-proclaimed exceptionalism, will fare any different? I think not. What is it that goes before the fall? Pride, isn't it? I say this with no glee, with no political agenda in mind at all. But if history is any indication, one day, there will be no USA except in the history books, and one day school children will visit the ruins and remains of our once great civilization that spanned from sea to shining sea but no longer is. One day the red, white, and blue will be unknown except to historians. All of which makes us reflect on the nature of lasting things and contingent things. And so we need to be careful in what and in whom we put our trust, in what and in whom we find our true purpose and our real identity.

When Jesus said what he said about the temple in his day, people did not receive this words well. They were not inclined to pay attention to him, for what he was suggesting was unimaginable. Even when he was a bit provocative, like in last week's gospel passage from John when he cleansed the temple, people were dismissive:

> "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews said, "This temple has been under

construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?"

Of course, John explains, he was speaking about the temple of his body. But what he predicted of the temple itself came to pass all the same. Those who heard him mocked his ability to *construct* the temple in three days. But the thought that the temple could be *destroyed* at all did not even figure into their wildest dreams. They were too confident, too arrogant. They were unwise. In a word, foolish.

The question that underlies this gospel, I think, is how to deal with change, how to adapt when *a* world ends and we have to live in a new world. Worlds seldom end with warm embraces and peaceful whispers. Rather, they end with violence and destruction, with terror and persecution, with adversity and suffering. The death of an old world and the beginning of a new world is very often disorienting. It is, in the words of a twentieth-century political writer, imprisoned for his opposition to authoritarian rule in his home country, "a time of monsters."

When the world we're accustomed to ends, how will we react? When our world is dying, can we even see the signs of it? And if we have the eyes to see, can we admit that our world is dying and can we adapt to the new world that is coming? Can we accept this reality and act in a way consonant with our Christian convictions? Or, stubborn in denial, will we betray our Christian commitments

and grow bitter and disillusioned, becoming agents of angry reaction, lashing out, persecuting, trying to claw back and retrieve a past that is simply irretrievable while refusing to live fully in the present, where the grace of God is abounding and at hand?

The logic of the world holds that it is better to persecute than to be persecuted, to punish rather than to be punished, to hold power rather than to be powerless, to be loved rather than to be hated.

But that is not the call of the gospel, nor the wisdom of God, nor the example of Jesus, who tells us that "by perseverance will [our] lives be secured." To secure life for ourselves, we must persevere … in the way of the Lord Jesus. And the way of Jesus is not a way of violent reaction, but of humble submission. The way of Jesus is to remain faithful to the righteousness and holiness of God and not give our full loyalty to the always shifting and ever changing institutions of men. The way of the Lord Jesus is not to be served, but to serve, even when that means that our service and our witness is despised and we are rejected.

So worlds end, and empires cease. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" and the plans and projects of "all the proud and all evildoers will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire, leaving them neither root nor branch." This is the way of things: the way of the world and the things of the world.

As I said on All Souls' Day, it is neither morbid nor morose to think of our own mortality. Death is the common lot of all who live. All

who are, are born; all the born die. This, too, shall be our fate. And so along those same lines, it is neither morbid nor morose to contemplate and ready ourselves for the day that is coming, when the institutions and monuments of this world that identify us and in which we find our identity will be cast down. These, too, will die. And *a* world will end. But not *the* world.

Of these things we must not be terrified. This Jesus commands. Rather we must be prepared in all times and in all situations to place our trust in the Lord and in his word. He tells us these things so that we may not be frightened, but bold and courageous, so that we might seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, secure in the knowledge that all the rest will be given to us besides (Mt 6:33).

As we consider the heavy themes in today's readings, we have to make sense not of "the world without end," but of the worlds that do end. And so I want to leave you with Jesus's own words, spoken to his disciples, to comfort and console them. From the gospel of St John: "Peace I leave with you; *my* peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid (Jn 14:27). I have told you [these things] so that you might have peace *in me*. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world" (Jn 16:33).