

33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time “Apocalyptic Language and the Big Picture”

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My friends, we are nearing the end of the liturgical year. Days are getting shorter. The darkness is growing outside. This is also a time of year that feelings of internal darkness can also grow, especially if we have concerns that are weighing heavy on the heart, perhaps with news events we learn about on the television, or on the internet or even with world events such as they are. The Gospel we treat today comes at an appropriate albeit uncomfortable time, asking us to pause a moment on whatever we are presently worried about so to see the big picture.

Bishop Barron has an interesting take on this Gospel reading which I have shared with you before. He would have us take a moment to appreciate the setting. We are in the 13th Chapter of St. Mark. The beginning of the chapter sets the context for what we just listened to. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem before the great temple. These disciples were country folk. Seeing the temple was an awesome experience for these fishermen. It would be like standing in front of St. Peters in Rome or the Capital Building for the first time. As the disciples are taking in the amazing view of the Temple before them, what does Jesus say? He says at the beginning of this chapter that the day is coming when all of this will be torn down, destroyed. Can you imagine how unpopular Jesus’ words might have been?

This is shocking language. And Jesus doesn’t stop there, the news he gives is worse: not only will the temple be destroyed; the entire created world will be destroyed too. This is the backdrop to our Gospel reading today. Listen to what he says. The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Jesus seems to be telling his disciples that the world is ending, and ending soon. This language is frightening! The genre of the language Jesus is employing is called “apocalyptic”. The use of this kind of language is meant to shake us from complacency, to see the bigger picture, and make us aware of our mortality so that we take appropriate and immediate action in lives. Apocalyptic language and themes challenge us to consider: since time is short, what is the most important thing that I should be doing right now?

But what do we make of it, apocalyptic language? My friends, we must be very careful not to read passages like we have today like the fundamentalists do. This is a rhetorical device and an important one to understand. The very word “apocalypse” gives us an important insight to scripture verses like we have today. The word apocalypse comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* which actually does not mean the end of the world at all. *Apokalypsis* actually means “unveiling”. This is why the word *apokalypsis* is translated into the word “revelation”. Something that is hidden in the old is now being unveiled into the new.

And so when Jesus talks about the sun, the stars and the moon going dark, Bishop Barron offers what I think is the best way to interpret this. For the ancient peoples, the sun, the stars, and the moon were tools of navigation and for telling time. They did not have watches or compasses. They steered their lives by these cosmic principles. They believed in cosmic powers governing the sun, moon and stars. These things gave them direction in life.

What Jesus is saying is this: all the ways you steer and govern your life are going to change. The temple is going away, which in fact happened in 70 AD when the Romans destroyed it. Meanwhile, the leaders you have trusted are going to let you down, which they did. Jesus is saying something is going to be unveiled, a new way to order your life. He is not talking about the end of the space-time continuum. He is talking about his death and resurrection.

And so, take a moment to contemplate Jesus' death. What does that mean? Jesus was put to death after being rejected by the religious and political leaders of his day. The religious leaders and the political leaders were the ones who were supposed to give people direction in life. That the Son of God was condemned to death by these leaders is a judgment on the local leadership's capability to give direction. Something is wrong with these leaders if the "Lord of Life" himself would be sentenced to death by them.

Meanwhile, think about the finality of death. If I am going to steer my life by something I can be completely certain of, it would be that I am going to die someday. Honestly. The Good News of *apokalypsis* is that Jesus' resurrection changes this forever. Jesus' resurrection in fact changes everything. With Christ, ordering my life on the fact I am going to die someday no longer makes any sense. The *apokalypsis* is: I know death has been conquered by Christ. Death no longer governs me.

The Christian apokalypsis is this: by being baptized into Christ Jesus I have been baptized into his death so that just as Christ rose from the dead I too can have resurrection and new life. I therefore steer the ship of my life by a different star than popular culture, public leaders or by world events that disappoint us or can tempt us into fear. The apocalypse, the unveiling, this new way of thinking, this new way of steering my life has been revealed to me. I have a new light to guide my life's journey. The old order has passed away and a new order has been ushered in. His name is Jesus.

This is what Paul meant when he said it is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. I no longer need the light of the temple in Jerusalem or the light of the sun, moon or stars. I now steer my life by the light of Christ. And therefore, my friends, apocalyptic language is not bad news at all. This is not depressing news. This is good news!

The truth is Jesus meant what he said: That generation did not pass away when the great unveiling occurred, because the apocalypse, the unveiling, happened only a few days later in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus was crucified. Death however didn't have the final say. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. And those who were witnesses of these things no longer steered their lives by the temple, or by the sun, moon or stars. They steered their lives by a wonderful new light, the light of the Risen Christ.

So what does that mean for us today? The invitation is to not steer our lives by the myriad of false lights in the world around us or be influenced by them. Do not be steered by the media. Do not be steered by any public leader who doesn't point us to Jesus. In the end, all these lights go dark. We are the people of the apocalypse. No matter what life throws at us, we see the big picture. With defiant joy, we steer our lives by the light of the Risen Christ in everything that we do and are challenged to demonstrate this concretely in how we live our lives, most especially in the manner we love God and neighbor. We order our lives in this way because no one other than Jesus has the power to save. Jesus alone is the way, the truth and the life.