

33RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, C

CALMNESS IN PERSECUTION

“You will be hated by men on account of My Name, but not a hair of your head will be lost” (Lk. 21: 17-18)

The Realities of Our Time: When we look around us the realities of wars, persecution, hatred, hardship, human sufferings, injustice, natural disasters, family break-ups stare us at the face. Then the Words of today’s Readings resonate in many ways. The one common variable is the fact that they all remind us of the end (of the world); and raises big questions: “When will this be? How are we to prepare for this end-time?”. In Christian theology, the eschatology, Parousia, or the Second Coming of Christ is a very intrinsic dogma. It is a concept that guides our lives and gives us hope that we have a home prepared for us in heaven. St. Paul articulates this very lucidly: “For we know when the tent we live in on earth is folded up, there is a house built by God for us, an everlasting home not made by human hands, in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5: 1). This can arouse eagerness, anxiety, and fear all at the same time. The Gospel bids us to stay calm and persevere.

The Certainty of the Day: The First Reading from Malachi (3: 19-20) proclaims the Day of the Judgement, when there will be punishment, for “the arrogant and evil doers”, and reward for those who “fear my name.” It calls to mind the picture of the Parousia presented by Jesus in Matthew 25, where the sheep are separated from the goats. The former is rewarded with “a place prepared for you before the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25: 34); and the latter is condemned to the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25: 42). Divine justice or final judgment is not to frighten or scare us from God, but they are to challenge us to flee to Him who is patient with us, compassionate in understanding and merciful to forgive.

The Temple in Jerusalem: The Temple was the centre of Jewish life and religion. It was a magnificent edifice that symbolised the presence of God among His people. It was the national place of worship where the Jews gathered for festivals and sacrifices annually. It was adorned with gold and precious stones: the façade of the sanctuary was crested with gold. The view of the temple from a distance was like a snow-covered mountain because of the white stones with which it was built. The beauty of the Temple was indisputable. This is what “some people” were admiring when Jesus used the occasion to prophesy about

the destruction of the Temple: “All these things you are staring at now – the time will come when not a single stone will be left on another: everything will be destroyed” (v. 6). This came to pass in AD 70 when the Romans conquered Jerusalem. Pope Francis on Sunday 19 November 2019 preached that “The destruction of the Temple foretold by Jesus is not so much a metaphor of the end of history as of the purpose of history.” This encounter stirs the mind to contemplate man’s adornment of the flesh; his energetic exertion in chasing the wind; and the ephemerality of this material world. We live in a fleeting world, where we are pilgrims, on a journey back home to our Father. Our attitude therefore should be that of relating with these things so wisely that they pave the way for the desired eternal union with the Trinity in that “house not built by human hands, but by God.”

The Big Question: Hearing this, the people asked Jesus, “Master, when will this happen, then, and what sign will there be that this is about to take place?” (v. 7). Aware of the anxiety His message impacted on His listeners and knowing that there are people who would exploit the human need for security and safety to deceive, abuse and scare the fearful, Jesus cautioned: “Take care, not to be deceived” (v. 8). For many will come saying “I am he” and, “The time is near” (v. 9). Jesus urged His listeners, and indeed all of us, to remain faithful and not be persuaded. Even in the face of the realities of tensions, war, plagues, famines, earthquakes Jesus preached calmness because the end is not so soon. The concern of Christians should not be about “When” rather our prerogative should be living so wisely that whenever the time comes, we will be ready and worthy. St. Paul’s exhortation in the Second Reading (2 Thess. 3: 7-12) was directed at those who, were using the expectation of the end of the world as an excuse to quit work and live slothful and lazy lives, depending on others. He urged everyone to go on working, living their normal lives. The expectation of the Coming of Christ should give us the hope to live fulfilled lives and not denigrate into laxity.

The Right Attitude: Jesus predicted persecution, imprisonment, hatred, and betrayals for those who believe in Him. But these are not realities to scare us. They provide the platforms to “bear witness” to the faith we profess in Christ. The message ends in reassuring hope that reminds us of God’s loving and abiding presence with His peoples in the face of tribulations. Thus, the right attitude in the face of all these is that of calmness, perseverance, faithfulness, and hope.

My dear friends, “You will be hated by men on account of My Name, but not a hair of your head will be lost” (Lk. 21: 17-18). Could it ever be more reassuring? The words of Jesus here are perfect for us at a time like this. We must live with the certainty that God, the Creator of the universe, guides history. All that happens are contained in Him. He is the Author of time and season; all lives belong to Him. Ours is to trust, surrender and let Him take the wheels of our lives and lead us safely home. May His grace be sufficient for us all.