

HOMILY SUNDAY 33 – B

“The End of The World: Last Things”

Note: Much of this homily is taken from *Who Knows the Shape of God?* by Corbin Eddy.

(Daniel 12:1-3; Ps 16; Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; Mk 13:24-32)

A lector at a Eucharistic celebration of a group of sisters was a bit nervous, and ended her reading with the emphatic statement, “This is the end of the world.” The congregation of sisters dutifully responded, “Thanks be to God!”

Are you in a rut, or in a groove? Some people are in a rut so long they think it’s a groove. Today’s readings are designed to jar us out of any rut we may be in.

Change your life; establish priorities and be open to a whole new reality!

In the gospel, Jesus is seated on the Mount of Olives, looking over the splendour of the Temple – the meeting place of faith, culture and history for his people. Most people would see the scene as a tourist sees it. Jesus, however, knew that this great Temple was vulnerable. Like all civilizations and cultures, fatal flaws can develop from within. It is also true that hostile forces can attack from without. Jesus saw that both forces were at work with regard to this great Temple. The Temple leadership was corrupt and flawed, and the power of Rome very present. For all its magnificence, the Temple was on shaky ground, as well as the religious and cultural structures that it represented. The world of the Temple was coming to an end.

Jesus invites his hearers to take the long view – beyond the temple, the city, even the heavens and the earth. He speaks of an end time, a final judgment, a new reality after some suffering. He invites us to go beyond civilizations, beyond the worlds we know and try to control, beyond the physical magnificence we see. We are to get out of our rut, and see the future with the eyes of Jesus.

The significance of this passage from Mark cannot be overstated. Located just prior to the passion narrative, it heralds what is to come. From that same Mount of Olives, Jesus himself would soon suffer his agony of discernment, and embrace the end of his own world. That same view would be before him on the night before he was betrayed and died. His admonition to “watch and pray” is in a sense his last will and testament to us. His watching and praying would lead him to the cross which for all its pain will be his ultimate triumph.

Here, and later in this same garden during his agony, Jesus invites us to join him in genuine discernment in our own lives, of what matters and what does not; of what will last and what will not; of the inevitable end of many worlds.

We all have some sense of this by just watching world events: the sudden death of friends; the bankruptcy of Enron; the horror of September 11th – the worlds in which people live can pass away suddenly in so many ways.

It is easy for us to get stuck in a rut, a rut that we think is a groove, but which distracts us from the real purpose of our lives. A biologist once described on television an experiment that he called “processional caterpillars.” He had lined them up on the rim of a pot holding a tasty plant so that the lead caterpillar was head-to-tail with the last caterpillar, leaving no break in the parade. The tiny creatures walked around the rim of the pot for a full week before all of them died from exhaustion and starvation. Not once did any of the caterpillars break out of the line and venture over to eat the plant. Food was only inches away, but the follow-the-leader instinct was even stronger than the drive to eat and survive.

An article covering the resignation of Bill Galston as a domestic policy advisor to President Clinton ran in the Baltimore Sun a few years ago. He announced plans to return to his teaching career at the University of Maryland – “to strike a new balance” in his life. He had been living a very productive life, but had to make changes to his own “big picture.” He had had a hand in the formation of the *National Campaign Against Teen Pregnancy*, and was working on education reform and promoting new legislation to strengthen *Head Start* programs. He tried hard to make time for his own son, Ezra, and even brought him to his White House office in the evening. Still, he was hounded by the fact that, more often than not, he came home too tired to really enjoy being there. There was a contradiction between his *Putting Children First* theme and policy initiatives, and his own relationship with his son. What finally brought his world to an end was a note from his son: “Baseball’s not fun when there’s no one there to applaud you.”

Two years ago, my brother Louis underwent an operation to remove an aggressive, cancerous brain tumour. Months of chemo and radiation treatment followed, and now he is living on borrowed time, having defied the odds. To say the least, the world he knew has come to an end. He has lost the ability to read and to drive. Yet he and his wife Judy are counting their blessings – they are closer to their children and especially their grandchildren than they have ever been, and see every day now as a total blessing.

This theme of watchfulness, typical of Mark, includes us all. We live in God’s time, under God’s reign, and are invited to see and understand our lives accordingly – in communion with Jesus who has gone before us and goes before us all the time. In some sense, every person in every generation experiences the end of the world and the last things. The issues that Jesus raises are truly perennial. His questions need to become our questions; his way of discernment needs to become our own. What will last and what won’t? What is worthwhile and what is not? These are timeless, ageless questions that call for real vigilance and prayer, struggle and sacrifice.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is a bridge between our present reality, and the awesome future reality that God has in store for us; that Jesus has already initiated.

How much we experience that new world already today depends on our willingness to change our lives; establish priorities and be open to a whole new reality!