

Today's reading is filled with scary and mysterious end times stuff: *tribulation, a blacked-out sun, the heavens shaking*. Throughout history, people have tried to understand the meaning of this mysterious language, reading the signs of the times, wondering if the end is near. That list includes saints and popes from the early middle ages. More recently, I recall a Christian radio evangelist, Harold Camping, who predicted the end would occur on September 6, 1994. When it didn't, he revised the date to the September 29th and then again to October 2nd. He later predicted March 31, 1995; then May 21, 2011; then later still, October 21, 2011. Finally, he gave up, declaring that nobody can know. As far as I can tell, there seems to be one commonality of all end-time predictions: *they've all been wrong*.

The words and phrases Jesus uses in today's Gospel, likely arouse questions for us, so perhaps a bit of an explanation is helpful. He said, *The sun will be darkened....the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken....* There are two layers of meaning to this.

On one level, Jesus is giving us a clue of the coming fall of Jerusalem and its Temple. For the Jews the Temple was a microcosm of the entire universe. It's been described that inside the temple, the veils were embroidered with images of the stars and constellations. *"The seven lights of the menorah represented the sun, the moon, and the five known planets."* With that in mind, we should also understand that for the ancient Jewish people, the Temple was the center of their universe, the meeting point of heaven and earth. We can imagine how its destruction would affect them.

To stamp out a Jewish rebellion that occurred roughly 40 years after Jesus offered the words we hear in today's Gospel, Titus, the Roman general who would later become emperor, began a 5-month siege that slowly brought death and horror upon the Jews, until at last his armies breached the walls, burned the city and reduced the magnificent Temple to a mere heap of rubble.

For the Jewish people this would be *the* cataclysmic event to mark the end of an age. We should also understand that for the Jewish people, 40 years was meant to represent a generation. Indeed that generation to whom Jesus spoke saw the tribulation, the sun darkened, the moon's light was dimmed, and the stars falling from the sky, as the Temple was destroyed.

But as I said, there's a second level of meaning to Jesus' words today: He was also speaking about his death that was very soon to come. As the evangelists describe it, *at noon, darkness came over the whole land* (15:33), *the earth quaked*, and *the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two* (Mt 27:51). With this in mind, we recall how Jesus had likened himself as the new temple (Jn 2:19-22), the new and definitive place where God would dwell among His people. And so, on Calvary, the destruction of this new temple, Jesus' body, was *the* cataclysmic event that would mark the end of an age.

Both of these layers of meaning speak to an end, an undoing of creation in a sense. It makes me think of St. Paul's words to the Christians of Corinth—and by extension, to us: *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit?"* (1 Cor 6:19). Yes, our bodies. I remember asking a doctor, *"At what point in our lives do our bodies begin to atrophy or begin their decline?"* She said that it was somewhere around the age of 20, which ought to make us all feel good(!). It's true: like Jesus' body, and like the Temple itself, these temples as we know them, will one day come to an end: *the stars will fall, the light will become dimmed, tribulation*.

I realize that the thought of death gives some of us anxiety. While on one hand, I get it, I also think we would do well to remind ourselves what our faith tells us about death and what follows it. Having recently celebrated All Souls Day, and as we pray for our loved ones, including those represented on our Altar for the Dead, I also bear in mind how the death of those we love weighs on our hearts. For this, let us remember that death does not get the last word, even though we all will face it.

So, for all the ways that the end of days is beyond our knowing—both our own, but also of the whole universal order—our task is not to figure it out, but instead to ready ourselves. From the time we are baptized—odd as it sounds—we are preparing ourselves for death and what follows it.

Perhaps one of the reasons death gives us anxiety is that on some level, we know our hearts aren't ready. Maybe we fear meeting our maker and having to reconcile with having ignored what he's been calling us to or for our lukewarm response. *So, if you only had a month, a week, a day, what would you change? What would you put your energies into?*

As we pray, in a few minutes from now, "*Thy Kingdom come...*," and as we receive the promise of our Baptism that's held in the Eucharist—food to help us as we move a little closer to our end of days—let us remember that *now* is what matters—this moment, today. Let us put our hearts in order, as though this is our last chance to get it right on this side of death.

ⁱ Healy, Mary. Gospel of Mark, The (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture) (pp. 267-273). Baker Book Group - A. Kindle Edition.