

Proper 28B  
November 19, 2006  
Deacon Peter Swarr

Ever since the month of June we have been traveling with Jesus and his disciples through Palestine thanks to the words of the Gospel of Mark. Week after week we have heard Jesus as he taught us about money, about loving God and neighbor, about the need to love God above wealth and any other earthly or heavenly thing that might vie for our love and devotion. Week after week the Gospel of Mark has told us that Jesus is the Messiah of God, the Messiah who has come to the world not to be a glorious king, not to be a worldly ruler, but to serve us by loving us, healing us, dying, and rising to new life for us all so that we might be brought back into a right relationship with the God of love. Mark has shown us that Christ came to show us the love of God which transcends anything that we can ever do or say. Christ came to show us the love of God and in showing us this astounding love bring us into new life in Christ a new life which we must share with the world.

Today Christ is speaking to his disciples in the midst of his final days in Jerusalem. In less than 24 verses from the end of this reading Judas will agree to betray Jesus. In just another few verses Peter will deny Jesus as he is held imprisoned, awaiting his death on the Cross. We are near the end of Jesus journey in Mark and as such Jesus instruction to his disciples, to those who follow him, turns to their future as disciples. Jesus is speaking to us today about what it will look like to be servants of God after he has died and risen from the grave. Today Jesus is pointing to our mission as Christian disciples, followers of the living Christ who promises to be with us until the end of time in the midst of this broken and sin-sick world. What following Christ will look like for us, and for all who follow the Messiah, is not according to the words of Jesus always a warm and reassuring task.

Today Jesus talks to us about the end, the end of time, and thus of his return to earth in glory. As such, the imagery and the words of the Gospel become cryptic and apocalyptic. Many different preachers and many different sects have focused on these apocalyptic words of Jesus, coupled with those in the Book of Daniel which we heard from this morning along with other writings from the Gospel of Matthew and the book of Revelation. All too often these words which focus on the end have been “deciphered and decoded” so as to tell the followers of certain sects and preachers the secrets of the world to come.

The fact is, if we read Jesus’ words in context, within the narrative of the Gospel story of salvation, we are shown the fact that as Christians we know very little of what is to come. What we do know is that as followers of Christ, the messiah of God who came to earth to show us the way of love, we will encounter times of difficulty and times of despair. But no matter what situation confronts us we are called by Christ to look to him and not to worldly teachers of end-time religion. No matter what is occurring in the world, be it persecution of Christians such as the persecution that has occurred in Southern Sudan or in parts of Indian. No matter what is happening in the world, be it war or famine such as

in the Middle East, in much of Africa, or parts of South America as Christians we are called to follow Christ and to look to him for our hope even in the midst of all the darkness that shrouds our globe.

It is easy to try to interpret all the dark events of our present age as signals of the end. Ever since the turn of the first millennia people have searched for signs that the world is coming to an end and thus that the pain and suffering of the world will also end. In the midst of every crisis and time of difficulty people of faith have been tempted to claim that the darkness and evil of our present age is a sign, a sign that the end is upon us. This has occurred through many different sects such as the Millerites in the northeastern US in the early to mid 1800's who predicted the second coming to occur at the end of 1843 and then on a number of other dates. Similarly this type of temptation can be seen in our own day through books like the *Left Behind* series which claim to map out the events of the end of the world as literally read in the Book of Revelation. Time and again we have seen that humanity often grasps for clarity in the midst of times of trial and difficulty.

However, Jesus tells us in Mark that we are not to be “led astray” by such “teaching” and “omens”. Instead, in the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews we are called to “endure” the present darkness of our age. We are called to endure as a people filled with hope—hope in the Living Christ. Instead of looking to false prophets we are called by Jesus himself to be alert and to remember that we are called to look to Jesus—the author and perfecter of our faith. In Christ we will find the strength that we need to continue on in the midst of trials and difficulties and tribulations. (What trials and pains do you bring today?)

The fact that the Bible contains books of apocalyptic writing tells us that human life on this fragile earth, our island home, is filled with difficulty and hurt. However, looking for secret codes and the answer to when all that is broken in life will all end is NOT the purpose of this writing. Instead apocalyptic writing such as we have heard today calls us as people of faith to look to God in the midst of trouble and despair and to realize that it is in God that we find hope. As Christ's disciples we are called to continue to work to spread that good news that even in the midst of war and rumors of wars, suffering and pain, we are to remember that we are people of hope. We are people who have the hope of Christ, a hope that overcomes death, a hope that even the darkness of our world can never overcome.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to be people of hope.