

INTRODUCTION

Alexander the Great built an empire that stretched from Sicily and Egypt all the way to India. This included Israel. About a hundred and fifty years after Alexander died, the Greeks still governed the area. By that time they started enforcing Greek culture and religion on all those whom they ruled. In Israel this meant, for example, that it was a crime to circumcise a child. Copies of the Scriptures were burned. And Jews could not follow their dietary laws or celebrate their usual feasts. The worship of Greek gods and goddesses was required. Some of the Jews gave in to the Greeks, others fought hard to hold on to their traditional faith in Yahweh. Our first reading gives us just a hint of how terrible this time was for the Jews. This reading is chosen because it reflects their faith in the resurrection of those who are faithful to Yahweh, and it prepares us for the gospel which also deals with the topic of resurrection.

HOMILY

Welcome to our alumni who graduated 50 years ago. We're very happy to have you come back and connect again with our parish and school. There have been a lot of changes in the world and in the Church in the past 50 years. Change has always been a part of life, but one thing about today's world is that the changes come so rapidly.

I recently saw a clipping about what life was like 100 years ago. In 1904 the average life expectancy in the U.S. was 47. Only 14% of the homes in the U.S. had a bathtub. (I wonder if there is any connection between those two statistics?) Only 8% had a telephone. There were only 8,000 cars in the U.S. and only 144 miles of paved roads. The maximum speed limit was 10 mph in most cities. The average wage in the U.S. was \$0.22 an hour. More than 95% of all births took place at home. Sugar cost \$0.04 a pound, eggs were \$0.14 a dozen and coffee cost \$0.15 a pound. The population of Las Vegas, Nevada was 30. Only 6% of all Americans had graduated from high school. There were only 230 reported murders in the entire U.S. Interesting facts. Life keeps changing. Our own individual lives keep changing. We are born, we become toddlers, we go to school, we become teenagers, we get married (most people at least), have children, middle age is on us before we know it, then, if we're lucky, we get to see old age. Then we leave this world. Lots of changes.

Our first reading is about change. The Greeks trying to change the Jews and basically get the Jews to give up their revered faith and their holy traditions. Those

who held onto their faith suffered a lot for it. Our first reading skips some of the more gruesome details. Many Jews gave up their faith, but those with deep faith held on. The event that most profoundly changed the course of human history was when Christ was born. Today he gives us a hint about some of the changes that await us when our present life has come to an end.

Throughout history, human beings have speculated about what the next life would be like. The ancient Egyptians thought somehow it would be very much like this present life. The ancient Greeks thought life after death was pretty much nothing unless a person was an exceptionally good or exceptionally bad person. Then there would be consequences. Then there are those, mostly orientals, who have always believed in reincarnation. There are those who believe there is nothing, those who believe we lose our individuality and our spirit is absorbed into the cosmos, and those who believe there are dozens of virgins waiting for them somewhere. God didn't tell the ancient Hebrews much about life after death. God was more interested in teaching them how to live this life right now. By the time of the Maccabees, a century and a half before Christ, we can see from our first reading, belief in a resurrection is starting to develop. Even by the time of Christ though, there were some Jews, especially the Sadducees, who didn't believe in resurrection.

Even within our own Catholic tradition there are various extremes. Fifty years ago, some of you may remember, we all tried to be saved with fear and trembling. Today many Catholics have adopted the spirit of new age theology, believing there is not even a hell and if there is, there's probably no one there. We're all going to heaven, no matter how we've lived.

We can speculate all we want, but there is someone who has been there and has come to tell us about it. And that is what we believe about Jesus. He is the best person to listen to. We believe he knows what he's talking about because he is God incarnate. We hear him speaking with authority today in the gospel. He simply told the Sadducees, it's not the way you think.

The Sadducees were quoting Old Testament law that stated if a married man died without children, his brother was supposed to take his widow as his wife and raise up children in his brother's name. In their example, you would have thought after the third or fourth funeral, the other brothers would have moved out of town. Jesus also picked up on an Old Testament quote to prove them wrong when he said God was called the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. Jesus said God is not the God of the dead but of the living. In other words those who have

died are still living, but in what way, it's hard to say because we have no basis for comparison. It's not going to be the way life is now. That's what Jesus meant when he said there would be no marriage or giving in marriage. That statement troubles some widows or widowers who have lost a loved one, worried they will lose the loving relationship they previously had with their spouse. I'm sure Jesus is not saying that. If anything, heaven will be love. After all, that's the main law he gave us and that's what's going to get us there. If love isn't there, it would be a complete contradiction of everything he told us. I believe that loving relationships will be a great part of the joy of heaven, especially relationships we've had with those we loved on earth. And what about – and I know you were thinking of this – making love as we know it now? Well, heaven will be much better and what that will be remains to be seen. St. Paul tells us: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard nor has it entered into the heart of any person what things God has prepared for those who love him. We live in the faith and hope that God's plans are beyond our wildest expectations and we celebrate that faith and hope now in the Eucharist.

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle November 14, 2004

INTRODUCTION

In our first reading today we hear from the prophet Malachi who lived about 470 years before Christ. Many Jews at that time were apathetic about their religious duties and about keeping the Commandments. He warns his listeners that the day of reward and punishment is coming. Fire is the symbol of both the reward and the punishment. It will be scorching heat for those who have not followed God's ways, and will bring warmth and healing to those who have been faithful to God.

HOMILY

In two weeks I'll be wishing people a "Happy New Year!" Now before you think I've completely lost it, I want to assure you that I am well aware that 2005 will not be here for another month and a half. BUT for the CHURCH, New Year's day is two weeks from today, as we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent. As the current Church year comes to a close, our Scripture readings today remind us that some day all of time, as we humans now know it, will come to an end. This is not meant to frighten or depress anyone. It is actually meant to be helpful.

This reminder of the end of time might be like a warning a person might get from their doctor telling them they need to quit smoking, or they need to take better care of themselves or bad things will happen to them if they don't. The Lord is telling us we will not be really happy if we live and act as if we are going to be here in this world forever. Our Lord has our best interests in mind. He has better plans for us than we can ever imagine. But the realization of those plans depends partly on us, and so he warns us to live according to the way of life he has taught us.

Today's gospel begins in the Temple. The Temple in Jerusalem must have been a symbol of stability and permanence for the Jews. Herod the Great had built it to last forever. Perhaps you've seen pictures of Jews praying at the Wailing Wall, which was the wall supporting the mount on which the Temple was built. The stones in the wall are about six feet long, three feet high and three feet deep. The Temple itself was built of stones that size. With the Temple built so solidly and with it being such a holy place, the Jews surely thought that only the end of the world could disturb that wonderful structure. They didn't know that many of those hearing Jesus would be older, but would still be alive when the Romans would destroy the Temple. Those big stones are still lying on the side of the Temple mount where the Romans threw them. It must have shocked Jesus' hearers when he said the Temple would be destroyed, but the end of the world would not immediately follow. Lots of other things will take place before the end. There will be earthquakes, famines, plagues, wars, and persecution for Jesus' followers. But for those who are faithful, "not a hair on your head will be destroyed."

Signs like earthquakes, famines, plagues, wars and persecution are in every age of history. Preachers throughout history have always pointed to them to tell us the end is near. In St. Paul's early letters, he thought the end might come during his lifetime. In his later letters, he realized it was not so imminent, and we heard today how he told those who were waiting around for it to happen to get back to work and stop depending on the rest of the Christian community to support them. Before the year 1000 everyone thought the world would end and a lot of people thought it would end before January 1, 2000 also. Jesus himself said no one knows when the end will come, yet there are TV evangelists today who tell us it's right around the corner. And if you send them a nice donation, they will send you a detailed

explanation as to exactly when it will happen. I often wondered, if they really believed it was going to end so soon, why do they want anyone's money?

So, you might ask, if no one knows when the end will come, what good are these signs Jesus gives us, signs that happen in every age of history? I guess he means them as signs of how fragile our present life is as well as signs that this world **will** end someday. All creation had a beginning and it will have an end. In the meantime, we must all be ready.

How many times have you heard someone say "If I only knew what I know now!" We've all said it at times. It was one of my father's favorite sayings: "I should have done this last week." Or "I should have said that to him." Hindsight is 20/20. If we could see the future we would all probably do a lot of things differently. Today's scripture readings do not tell us what's going to happen next week, but they do try to save us from spending eternity saying to ourselves: "I wish I had known better."

Jesus doesn't always tell us what we want to hear, but he does tell us the truth, if we want to listen. Jesus does not want to scare us but to save us. The Mass, as always, reminds us of God's love and of all that Jesus did to save us.

Christ the King– C Cycle

November 21, 2004

INTRODUCTION

The first king in Israel was King Saul. After he died in battle, the country split apart. David was chosen as king by the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The northern tribes recognized Saul's son, Ishbaal as king. He was an inept leader and after seven years of intrigue, war and bloodshed and the eventual murder of Ishbaal by a couple of mercenaries, the northern tribes came to David and asked him to be their king. That is the focus of today's first reading. David was a great leader who succeeded in uniting the tribes of Israel and leading the nation to prosperity and peace. David was viewed as an ideal king and the Jews always hoped for another like him. Since a king was always anointed for office, their ideal king was often referred to as "*the* anointed one." The Hebrew word for this is "Mashiah." In Greek the word is

“Χριστός.” The one we recognize as Messiah and Christos is Jesus of Nazareth. Unlike David he is not a military, political figure. St. Paul tells us his kingdom goes beyond time and space as it is known in this life, and the gospel, in a scene taken from his dying on the cross, shows us he rules only by love.

HOMILY

You’ve perhaps heard this story before about my friend Wayne King, a former Maryknoll priest I knew from the seminary. A couple of times we went on vacation together and once we visited my brother. His two daughters were very young at the time and when I introduced Wayne King to them, his older daughter asked, “Where is his crown?”

When we think of kings, it is automatic to associate them with castles and crowns, royal robes, jewelry, servants, and other symbols of wealth and power. But today our king is pictured hanging on the cross, his crown a crown of thorns and his small group of followers nowhere to be found except for his mother, one faithful disciple and a couple of women. No rings were on his fingers, just nails in his hands and feet. No royal robes, instead he was most likely stripped naked as was the Roman custom, but later centuries have covered him over with a loin cloth for modesty. No one is cheering him or praising him. His enemies are outdoing each other mocking him. After three years working to establish a kingdom of love, he is condemned as a criminal, tortured and executed. He warned his followers they would suffer the same fate and most of them did.

Think of this: Moses worked 40 years to establish Judaism. For 45 years Buddha taught the way of enlightenment. For 23 years Muhammad preached his doctrine to his followers. The carpenter on the cross, with the sign above his head, Jesus Christ, king of the Jews, from the backwater, a religiously insignificant area of Galilee, worked for *only three years* to preach the kingdom of God. And after two thousand years about two billion people, including ourselves, call him our king! That in itself is a miracle. That shows tremendous foolishness or tremendous faith. We have chosen to follow a king who does not parade around in worldly glory or demonstrate worldly power. We follow a king who we believe to be “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” Our king was willing to come

down to our level, to know first hand what suffering, rejection, misunderstanding, humiliation was like, and he proclaimed he has the power to transport us to a better life, a kingdom of peace and love and joy, if we want to follow him there.

Other than royal robes and golden crowns, the other thing we automatically associate with kings is that they order people around. They have the authority to make rules. Jesus told us what he wants. He wants us to enjoy eternal life and everlasting happiness with him in the kingdom of God. And the rules he gave us exist only to help us get there. And this is where it is a little harder for all of us to follow him as king. It's easy to admire him as a great and loving person. It stretches our faith a little more to admit he is God's Son and "the image of the invisible God" in the most literal sense of the words. But it really proves whether we see him as our king, if we are willing to recognize he has the authority to tell us how to live. When we admit that he has the authority to us that we should pray, that we must keep the commandments, that we are to forgive others, to share our resources with those less fortunate, to live chaste lives, to believe in and nourish ourselves with his unique presence in the Eucharist, then, in the most concrete way, we acknowledge him as our king.

A cartoon in the New Yorker showed two fellows walking to lunch one day and the one was complaining to the other "my boss keeps telling me what to do." People today don't like being told what to do. Kings are pretty much a thing of the past, authority is viewed with suspicion, we like to make our own rules. Even God, in the view of many, is a good natured old man who doesn't pay much attention to how any of us are living and he is going to reward all of us in the end, no matter how we've lived. That nonsense is known as new age theology, not the gospel.

Christ did not take up a cross just for the fun of it. He suffered to save us. But he can only save us if we do not forget that he is always our king, not just in an abstract way but in our concrete, everyday lives. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

The prophet we hear in today's first reading lived over 700 years before Christ. Most probably he had witnessed the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians, fierce warriors who came from what is modern day Iraq. The southern kingdom of Israel, centered in Jerusalem, lived in fear and trembling that the same fate awaited them. In spite of great turmoil, his message is a message of peace, a peace we continue to yearn for. It is a peace, however, that flows only from walking in God's ways.

HOMILY

No one is sure just when Advent started. In the fifth century it was a practice in France to fast three days a week from the feast of St. Martin on November 11 until Christmas. A century later Christians were fasting everyday from November 11 until Christmas. This was known as "St. Martin's Lent." The practice spread to other countries. When I was a child there was still this austere or ascetical side to Advent. In order to prepare for Jesus' birth, we would give up something we liked or try to be extra good, not for Santa Claus but for the Christ child, and often we went to confession during that time to prepare ourselves better spiritually. Things have really changed. These days, so many more people are busy, busy, busy with the many activities that lead up to Christmas, while fewer and fewer have time to prepare themselves to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Now, I'm not encouraging anyone to become a Scrooge. As we get closer to celebrating God's love shown for us in the birth of Jesus, many of our activities reflect joy and love. Joy is certainly an appropriate emotion at this time. And trying to act kindly to one another and showing greater appreciation for those we love is always in season. But commercialism and materialism has, in so many instances, caused us to shift our focus away from the spiritual side of what we are celebrating.

The deeper spiritual meaning of Christ's birth can be found only through prayer and reflection. As in earlier times, we could prepare ourselves spiritually by fasting. Fasting probably wouldn't do most of us any great harm. But fasting could take the form of fasting from smoking, gambling, entertainment, criticizing, keeping so busy that we seldom have time for prayer. Christ came down to us for only one reason, to lift us up to himself, to fill us with his grace and life. Advent is a splendid opportunity to enrich ourselves spiritually and to open ourselves more fully to God's love. We shouldn't miss the opportunity Advent offers us.

There is another reason, too, for us to take Advent seriously. Although Christ came to us 2000 years ago, Christ is going to come again to call us from this life to himself. Will we be ready to meet him? The second reading for today and the gospel stress this aspect of Advent. St. Paul said in today's second reading: "it is the hour now to wake from sleep." And Jesus too tells us "Stay Awake!" We never know when that day will come. It is obvious Jesus is telling us to stay awake in a spiritual sense as it's impossible, as well as unhealthy, to be awake physically all the time. Certainly the people Jesus talks about in today's gospel, those eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, those working out in the field or grinding corn at the mill were physically awake, but not all were spiritually awake. They were too busy with their everyday activities and when God called them they were not prepared. The examples Jesus uses about two people doing something and one being taken and the other being left have nothing at all to do with a popular notion known as "the rapture." They emphasize the suddenness with which the Lord may come to any one of us.

Our salvation is nearer than when we first believed, St. Paul tells us. Are we going to be ready to celebrate God's love in Jesus' birth and rejoice in that love, or are we just going to be relieved when it's all over? The answer to that will be determined by what we do in the next few weeks. And are we ready to welcome Jesus when he comes again to take us to himself? If we don't think we are, what can we do to be able to ready?