

33rd Sunday in Ordinary (B)  
(Daniel 12:1-13 / Mark 13:24-32)  
14.11.2021

The Scripture readings heard this morning are what we call *apocalyptic writings*. Such texts can baffle us modern readers. In our bid to understand them we can sometimes misinterpret their significance altogether. Perhaps the first thing I could offer this morning by way of commentary on our two readings is simply to say something about the nature of biblical apocalyptic literature. A good clue to understanding the sense of apocalyptic writings is given to us by the second name by which the last book of the Bible is known. The last book of the Bible is called either *The Apocalypse* or *The Book of Revelation*. Apocalypse signifies revelation. Note what I said: revelation... not revelations! The apocalyptic writings of the Bible are revelatory texts. That does not mean to say that they tell us literally what is to come. Some pious Protestants of a more evangelical bent, who think of all biblical texts as needing to be understood literally, make the mistake of thinking that what we have in apocalyptic writings are predictions (detailed revelations) of what is to come. While this way of approaching the apocalyptic writings of the Bible is perhaps more prevalent in certain Protestant circles it can also to be found in some non-formed Catholic circles as well. I am sure, like me, you have come across examples of people saying that what we read in the apocalyptic writings generally, and in the Book of the Apocalypse in particular, are foretelling prophecies of what will happen at the end of time. Those who hold this position think of the authors of apocalyptic writings as foretellers of what will occur in a forthcoming period... a forthcoming period which many such interpreters are sometimes inclined to see and present as imminent – indeed, breaking in upon us. To understand and present the apocalyptic texts of the Bible in this manner actually does these writings a grave injustice. It can lead us to miss out on their true relevance. Put simply, to see the apocalyptic writings as referring literally to some far off point in time – *the last days* – is to miss their point. Indeed, to think of *the last days* as being up ahead of us, somewhere in a future period, is to bypass a central teaching of the New Testament. The proper New Testament understanding of *the last days* is that we are already in them. We are in them ever since Christ's coming into this world. So, we have been in *the last days* for over two thousand years at this stage! We are not at the eve of *the last days*, nor are we at the end of them. We are slap bang in the middle of them... and *these last days* could go on for ages to come! A few references to some New Testament texts might help us grasp the point being made here. I won't go into a detailed examination of Bible verses which could be presented as proof texts. I will just allude to a few verses taken from New Testament books. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews insists that *God has spoken to us in these last days through God's Only Son, Jesus Christ*. Saying that, quoting the Epistle to the Hebrews, understand me. I am not denying that there is yet a time to come. There certainly is. What I am saying is that when the Bible speaks of *the last days* it is speaking of the time here and now and of a time yet to come. More than that, I would want to stress that in *the last days* must also be included days that are already behind us. *The last days* is all time that has been, is and will be, ever since the advent of Jesus Christ in history. *The last days* refer to past days, to the present (the here and now), and to a time yet to come. We find this thought not just in the writings of the Epistle to the Hebrews, but also in the writings of Paul. Paul articulates this thought in his Second Letter the Corinthians, for example; or again in his Letter to the Galatians. (Cf. 2 Corinthians 6 and Galatians 4.) The Apostle speaks of *these the last days*, or again of *these days of the plenitude of the ages* or *the fullness of time*. John for his part speaks of the time in which he lived as *the last hour*. A long hour indeed! John's expression – *the final hour* – shows us that we simply cannot read every word employed in a Biblical text in a literal way! Literally, an hour is made up of sixty minutes! All that I have

shared so far shows us that, in a New Testament vision of things, ever since the time of Christ, we are living in the *final age* of this world. Let me further underline the point I am trying to make by pointing out that after the New Testament – which is also referred to as the Last Testament – there will be no other!

Let me repeat myself with insistence. The apocalyptic texts of the Bible do not predict events which have as yet to occur. What they do is something other than that. So, we might ask: what is that? Here is the answer. Using imaged language, the apocalyptic texts reveal to us the sense of what we live already. By *the sense* I mean the true and deep significance of what we live in the here and now of our lives. Think about it. We have just to look around us to see this illustrated. If we open the *news feed* page on our computer screens or if we go to the shops to buy the daily news sheets, what do we see recorded therein? What we see recorded in those places is how nation is fighting against nation. What we see recorded therein are reports of tribal wars, insurrections, ethnic combats, rebellions of all sorts, multiple conflicts raging... all the kind of things the apocalyptic writings refer to. Some might go on to ask: but what then about what the Scriptures call *the signs and portents to be witnessed in the skies* which are referred to in some apocalyptic texts? Again, think about it. We don't really have to look too far for these either. Consider the challenges of climate change confronting our world! When I say that, please understand me. I am not suggesting that a flood here, a famine there, or a drought somewhere else... or whatever other natural disaster that befalls the inhabitants of our world in certain areas affected, are events sent by God to somehow punish people. There are some people who read certain terrible events which visit our world in the light of apocalyptic writings in such a way. They see cause leading to effect in a rather simplistic manner. We have heard some people speak of devastation striking particular places as God's response to a Gay Pride rally in that area, or again as a punishment meted out to all the inhabitants of a State that voted in favour of civil partnerships or the legalisation of abortion, for example. Such a reading of things – seeing a wicked cause leading a terrible effect as an act of God responding angrily to humanity's depravity points to a rather primitive way (I dare to say, pagan way) of reading the Bible and understanding God's ways! When reference is made to *signs in the skies* in apocalyptic writings, attention should be given to very basic biblical thought. A very basic understanding of things in the Bible is that humanity lives at one with, in symbiosis with, the cosmos. It is that humans are at one with the natural world surrounding them. It should be said that it is not only Jews and Christians, but many thinking people, who consider this to be true. When this is how one reasons then dramatic events in the natural order can be (indeed, are) seen as somehow linked to humanity's experience. Humans can and will see in natural events what might be thought of as *parables of their personal dramas*. Let me explain myself by having recourse to some examples drawn from popular speech. There are many sayings that point to a whole thought process which links human experience to what goes on in the natural world. For example, people speak of *feeling arid* or *being dry*. They speak of themselves (their inner experience) as if they find themselves living in a land of drought. They do this at what might be thought of as *desert periods* in their existence... times in which they are emotionally cut off from others, unconnected, isolated – affectively or in whatever way. Or again, people will speak of being *caught up in the storms of life*, being *buffeted* as if in storm by what is going on in their relationships or in other domains when *the going is tough* and they are experiencing adversity of some kind or another. People will also talk about *being scorched* by certain happenings or again *submerged* by them. *Scorched*, as if under an unsupportable heatwave, or, *submerged*, as if caught under and covered by flood waters.

All that I have been saying wants to illustrate that what we read in apocalyptic texts deal not so much with historical/chronological events as they employ images which hint at people's

experience at other levels of their existence in the here and now of their lives; what they are going through in their minds, hearts and spirits.

Again let me plead to be properly understood. I am not denying that this era – like every age which has gone before – may well have an end to it. It will. That being said, over and beyond every end, in the vision of the Bible, it remains that a new beginning, a fresh start, will follow on. The whole notion of death leading to life is central to the paschal message of the New Testament. For this reason *the word of God which shall never pass away – the word of God*, as we heard in today's Gospel passage – points to a future hope beyond the trials of this present age. It has to be said that the apocalyptic writings always contain within them an element of optimism. This is true however dramatic certain of these texts can come across to us at times, however catastrophic their message may appear to us. In the end, the apocalyptic writings always point to a resolution of things. They always point to God's ultimate victory. That is clear in the two texts read this morning. In our first reading we heard of how God's people will be spared in the end and led to shine as bright stars for all eternity. In the Gospel passage we listened to the Son of Man is spoken of as reigning sovereignly over all things.

As Christians we dare to believe as Julian of Norwich points out so well and so succinctly: *In the end all shall be well. Yes, in the end, in all manner of things, all shall be well.* That *all things shall be well* depends on one thing only, or rather one person only: Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ in whom all that has been, all that is, all that is to come, and all that ever will be, are destined to find fulfilment. The bottom line of biblical revelation is that Christ is the One in whom everything and every one – past present and future – is given sense and finds meaning. Fittingly, the final call of the word of God heard on this Sunday is a call to be vigilant. It is a call to wait upon Christ's fulfilment of all that is, with faith held firm and hope kept alive in our hearts. May the word of God heard this Sunday awaken within us that holy hope of which Paul speaks so eloquently in Roman 5, declaring that such hope *will not disappoint*. Attentive to the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives – Jesus Christ who has worked marvels in the past and is present in the here and now – let us look to the future, not with dread, but with the sure and certain hope that *in the end He will make all things well*.

This world's dramatic struggles will cease when everything and everyone is reconciled in Christ. Fittingly the end of all the apocalyptic writings of the Scriptures is the promise of God's ultimate victory. Despite humanity's foolishness and even humanity's rejection of God; despite our foolishness and our rejections of the Lord's way in our lives... in the end God will have His way. God's way is always life, because He is always love. The Lord lives and He wants that those whom He has loved into being be brought to life in Him. The main purpose of the apocalyptic writings is to encourage God's people. It is not to frighten them. The primary concern of the apocalyptic writers was to encourage God's people not to give up. It was to help their readers to believe in the Lord and through their faith in Him to overcome the trials they were enduring.

God's promise at the end of the Book of Revelation could hardly be any clearer. It is a promise to renew, heal and restore the tired, wounded, broken world; a promise to renew, heal and restore the tired, wounded, broken people we all are.

In the apocalyptic writings God is always shown to reign over all. The call of the apocalyptic writers is to recognise His lordship and to submit to it in our lives. May we do so this day and every day of our lives!

Amen!