

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

**16 Pentecost**  
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**Fr. Bill McGinty**

**“Apocalypse Now!”**

The Old Testament prophets had a lot to say about ‘the end days’. They believed that the world would end with one great battle. They spoke of this day as the ‘Day of the Lord’ and they spoke of it being both glorious and terrible. Whole books of the Old Testament deal with the end of the world and are called “Apocalyptic Literature.” This language frightened Israel. It made people pause, think about their life and turn back from sin and wickedness.

Some of this is reflected today in the reading from Ezekiel, although Ezekiel is not a prophet of doom by any means. The sword of which he speaks is the Babylonian Army, but it’s also the personal judgment of God on the wicked which speaks of a death that will last forever. “As I live”, says the Lord God, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O’ house of Israel”

Somehow Israel stumbles and falters into the time of Jesus. No longer a power in the land, her people are disillusioned. The structure that was the twelve tribes has disintegrated. Even Kingship has lost its mystic, power and influence.

All that is left of God’s Chosen People is the beauty of their sacred literature and a remnant of holy people, who still worship God and keep the commandments. We call them the ‘Anawim’.

It is from this band of faithful yet ordinary people that God’s salvation and the Messiah comes. From Joseph and Mary from Zachariah and Elizabeth, God sends man’s hope for the future. There is a commonality among these people and it is that they are a prayerful people who both speak to God and listen to God speak to them in their lives.

The New Testament is also full of apocalyptic literature. Jesus speaks of the end of time and the end of the world constantly. Many of his parables and teachings are about judgment and what happens when this mortal life is over. Jesus speaks of the coming of God’s Kingdom not as a distant reality, but as something that he sees and predicts that is not far off.

Back in the fifties and sixties you could find strange people wandering around Hyde Park Corner or Trafalgar Square or Times Square, NY with signs reading: “The end of the world is nigh.” We laughed at them and thought them crazy.

Today, we are not laughing, we are wondering. In the last twenty years anyone who knows their Bible has watched as passage after passage, prediction after prediction has come true. In 1985 we had drought in Africa, starvation and death followed. We had acid rain

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destroying the forests of Northern Europe. We had the collapse of Communism in 1989, the onset of incurable diseases. The Polar caps are melting and the sea levels rising. Climates have changed more rapidly in twenty years than they have in the last 5,000. Winters are colder, summers are hotter. In Europe the Danube, Rheine and Seine have flooded vast areas. Hurricanes have increased and we have the feeling that the planet is coming apart and we can't control it. The Ozone Layer is shot and with it global warming brings its own dangers.

In the Gospels Jesus says: "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars... There will be earthquakes and floods, children will turn against their parents. There will be pestilence and disease. You will run into the fields but there will be nowhere to hide; you will cry out to the hills and the mountains to cover you."

This is apocalyptic language. We are reminded of it now on a daily basis by Tsunami and hurricane; by forest fires in California and places West. We see and watch as flood sweeps houses down mountainsides and into the sea and we can't help but think that all of this has a prophetic quality. Nor are we calmed by what is happening politically in our world. We worry about extremists and extreme regimes and the atom bomb. We thought the end of Communism would bring peace and stability, instead we feel more uncertainty and a sense of danger.

Yet none of this is as important as the other death that Jesus speaks of in his teachings. For if Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God and the everlasting reward that that will bring; he also speaks of punishment and damnation. He speaks of the choices that people make, the clear choice between good and bad, right and wrong, goodness and evil. His teaching appears in the "Sermon on the Mount" and in "Parables" such as the "Weeds in the Field", "The story of Lazarus and Dives", and the "Unjust Steward." "He speaks of the culture of Death, the Death of the Soul of Man."

In answer to all those who refuse to believe in Hell, Jesus teaches that for every good act there will be reward and for every bad act there will be punishment. We are used to these kinds of opposites, they run through science and nature, night and day, dark and light, joy and despair.

The Christians never fear the death the Romans or Jewish authorities could visit upon them, rather they fear what Jesus calls "the death of the soul", the total separation of every thing that we love and cherish.

It is a death that begins with moral blindness. We see it in dictatorships, evil juntas and regimes. We saw it in Communism and we see it in terrorists whether they be IRA or El Qaeda. Yet, Jesus' teaching does not just address these extremes. Jesus warns his own disciples and apostles what can happen when they place their own interests before God's interests. Even as Christians, we can believe in a faith that is not in the Gospel. Can and do we re-write scripture to fit our white, middle-class Western American values? I think

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sometimes we do. There is a terrible danger and pitfall that we can fall into as Christians, when we get to be so liberal the Gospel is not recognizable anymore; because nothing, just nothing is right or wrong. Or, we get to be so conservative that the Gospel belongs to us, we own it, and we will not allow you in, to share it.

Last year I listened to a Christian teacher who said she hoped John Kerry would burn in hell. I didn't particularly agree myself with John Kerry, but I think I'd like to fight to keep the poor guy out of hell. Moral blindness takes many forms. Fundamentalism can be just another form of Relativism. How can we re-educate people to all that is good, all that is holy about this faith of ours?

Well, St Paul and Jesus in the Gospel take a pretty good shot at it in today's readings.

Paul says: "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good." Jesus says the same thing in the Gospel: "If you only love those who love you, what merit is there in that?"

Love cannot masquerade in insincerity. For love to be genuine, it must come from the heart. For all love to be both sincere and genuine, it must be grounded in humility. The story of Revelation, the Story of God's Salvation has to begin with humility. The God of love, the God of the Universe, the God of our Creation, has come among us and brought us his son. Besides gratitude our attitude has to be one of humility in the face of our God. Acknowledge that each of us is created with limitations and you acknowledge a oneness of purpose, a brotherhood, a sisterhood, a commonality that deserves respect, dignity and deserves our love. Christians need genuine love. It is what keeps our eyesight morally focused. We have balance.

Paul urges hope, patience, perseverance and hospitality because for the Christian they flow from getting Jesus "command to love," right. He defines the Christian by the zeal, care and love he has for others, but particularly for one another. This is something new in Paul's day, that a group of people's 'badge of honor' would be love.

"Bless those who persecute you  
Bless and do not curse them.  
Rejoice with those who rejoice,  
Weep with those who weep.  
Live in harmony with one another."  
These are the distinguishing marks of the Christian.

This is the message of Jesus, that his followers have access to a new kind of power. It is available to them when they work together for good. In Christ's name they can avail themselves of what Jesus has won by his death upon the cross.

"Truly, I tell you if two of you agree on Earth about anything you ask, it would be done by my Father I heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in your midst."

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There is an Episcopal church in New Mexico called St Mark's on the Mesa. It stands just outside Albuquerque. It is an amazingly successful church with many ministries and outreaches. But written on the front page of its weekly bulletin you will find these words:"

"We are a worshipping community of Christians. The primary expression of our life together is the many small house prayer groups within the Parish. From them we draw our strength for Jesus said: 'where two or three of you are gathered. I am there in your midst.'"

It is this unity of purpose and power of prayer that gives Christians strength. It is a strength we need in a world where the "death of the soul" mentality is all around us. It is time for us as Christians to renew. It is time for us Christians to strap on our armor for battle. For we must empower ourselves with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We must reach for a Charismatic renewal as the disciples did at Pentecost. We can no longer sit by while our society crumbles around us, rather we must become pro-active in our communities.

Let us pray today, to seek out our Battle Hymns of Praise to our God. Let us unfurl the banner of our Christ, let us arm ourselves with the sword and shield of our faith and together fight the fight that needs fighting.

But let us work for our Christian values together, praying together for the transforming strength of the Holy Spirit. This we ask in Christ's name.

Amen+

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