

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 19, 2006

Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16:5, 8-11; Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; Mark 13:24-32

Homilist: S. Cecilia Canales

These scripture readings can sound very ominous on first glance. They speak of times of distress and tribulation and have been used by some preachers to frighten their listeners into fearing the end times or their own personal judgment days. I remember as a child my imagination would go wild with the description Mark uses of the sun and the moon going dark and the stars falling from the sky, and it would frighten me.

I think if we look more carefully, we find something very different from this dooms day approach. When we read these scriptures through the eyes of faith, we discover a faithful God trying to assure us that we have nothing to fear when faced with calamity. We will not fall victim to these catastrophes. The first reading and the gospel both begin with frightening possibilities, but end with hope. “The wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever.” (Dn.12:3) “They will see ‘the Son of Man coming in the clouds’ with great power and glory, and then he will send out the angels and gather his elect...” This is good news!

Furthermore, those who follow Jesus are being consoled in the psalm response:

I set God ever before me; with God at my right hand, I shall not be disturbed. Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices, my body, too, abides in confidence; because you will not abandon my soul. (8-10)

Jesus does exhort us, though, to “learn a lesson from the fig tree,” to read the signs around us, not only of nature, but more importantly, about what is of God and what is not. We must be people sensitive to God’s presence, capable of discerning what is the greater good.

So many issues face us in our world today, and the choices we make impact not only our personal lives, but rather, can also have global implications. What is the earth telling us about global warming and my use of natural resources? What is our country choosing in seeking cheaper prices through “free trade” versus “fair trade” which addresses the economic needs of the supplier? Why is there such a market for modern-day slavery in the form of human trafficking? Is greed or pleasure or convenience the value which motivates us or the gospel?

If we are to be the wise who shine brightly and those who lead others to justice, we must be very attentive to the complex realities of our times. We have a responsibility to use our God-given intelligence and our hearts of compassion to act in Jesus’ stead in our day and place. I think Jesus is telling us that it is not enough to run for cover when disaster strikes, but rather to hold fast to God and live for others.

Last spring the plight of undocumented workers in this country was front page news. This summer our congregation mailed out information to our benefactors about our life and ministries.

One of the pictures depicted myself and another sister participating in a demonstration and holding a sign that read, "There is no such thing as an illegal human being." We received a few letters of response indicating displeasure that we were supporting "illegal immigration," and one person said they could no longer donate to our sisters because of this. Well, what I thought we were saying with that sign is that every person is entitled to be treated with respect and dignity. The bishops of California had spoken out strongly against legislation that would criminalize tending the human needs of any person because of their legal status, so we thought we were in good company.

Whether or not I agree with another person's actions, I believe Jesus would want me to treat them with respect, and honor their dignity as a child of God. I don't regret carrying that sign. I would not fear "judgment day" because of it. I think I was discerning the signs of the times in what I did. I don't know for sure, but I don't want fear of losing the approval or support of others to deter me from making those kinds of choices.

This Sunday's readings are an examination of conscience, not because we do not know "the hour or the day" when our personal end will be, but rather because each of us needs to be alert to what our times are requiring of us. We have a mission as the baptized to be Christ for our generation. And just as we do not know the hour or the day, we also do not know how, where, or when we will need to en flesh Christ for others. That is the measure by which we will be judged!