

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B
November 19, 2006

When I was in the seminary, I would sometimes go for a walk around the seminary grounds at night, in the expansive back yard there in the middle of the New York metro area. Bushes and trees would hide all the evidence of the man-made buildup which surrounded us, until a break in the trees would reveal the convergence of two big expressways only blocks away. From one moment, when it seemed like the grounds I was walking were much like it might have been centuries ago, save for an asphalt sidewalk winding through; then suddenly, a reminder of the development that took over the land. And hanging over it all: the moon. The grasses had grown, died, regenerated; the leaves on the trees had changed with each passing year; things grew and died, came and went, were torn down and built up; but that same old moon, never changing, always hanging there in the sky as though watching over the action, or action, as the case may be. Watching over that ground, I supposed, when it was perhaps covered with water, when it teemed with now-extinct creatures; when humanity was mostly clustered on the other side of the planet; watching when the first explorers encountered the natives who lived there; there in the sky, silent witness to the relentless growth which now illuminated a land, a land aglow with artificial lights which once had only the moon and stars at night to show its inhabitants the way.

In this week's Gospel passage from Mark, Jesus says "in those days after that tribulation the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." In the end, even the most dependable and reliable of the things in the physical realm will no longer be; if the sun and the moon and the stars, which have been there over our world since the very beginning, will not make the transition to the life to come, can we imagine that the things which we have created—the cars, the TVs, the mansions, the Playstations—will be of any great importance, will be of any durability whatsoever? All these things in the physical realm will have outlived their usefulness, and so they shall not be, any more. And for those who invested all of their happiness in these things and these things only, there will be no future happiness; and for all those who placed all of their hopes and dreams in the things of this world, there will be no hope, and no point in dreaming. Jesus says further, "learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near." The lesson of the fig tree, is that these things of which Jesus speaks of are near; not that the moon, the sun, the stars are to be darkened next week, or fall from the sky tomorrow; but their uselessness is on its way. Their uselessness is near, because Jesus has come, and he has implemented his plan for our salvation, and his works are underway. What he speaks of is in motion; his plan for us will come to fruition, whether we are prepared for their culmination, or not.

What this passage from Mark's Gospel is not about is predicting the end times. Jesus says that "of the day or hour, no one knows; neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father," it was part of that divine knowledge which Jesus surrendered when he came as man, and subjected himself to the laws of man's world, and the rules of learning. But, we are to live always as though these things are coming; we should be living our lives right now as if that sun is going dark, right before our eyes; as though those reliable, steady stars were falling from the sky, because this world *is* passing away; it was not meant to be our domain forever, God made us for more than just this. And so the lesson of the fig tree is, don't get too attached to these things: enjoy them, sure, appreciate them, yes, utilize them, certainly; but don't place all

of our happiness and meaning in life in their existence; don't put our eggs in that basket, because there will come a day when that basket isn't even going to be. And the basket can be anything, anytime we say that "I could never be happy without ..." you name it, be it a thing, be it a person. Our only *guarantee* in heaven is the presence of God and his angels and saints. The lesson of the fig tree, is that we don't have time to become detached from the passing treasures of this world, can't say we'll get to it whenever, because Jesus is already near. His kingdom is already in our midst; and so we have no excuse for having an overly-worldly attitude when he offers us grace upon grace. He is near in the randomness of life and death; there are many alive today who people thought would not be, and many who have gone to meet our Lord unexpectedly, and with no warning. The lesson of the fig tree is, don't get relaxed because "the signs" aren't there that Jesus is returning, because the stars haven't fallen from the sky yet; in all likelihood we are going to go to meet him before he returns to claim us. We should be living, always and at all times, as though we'll be seeing him any minute!

In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that Jesus "offered one sacrifice for sins, and took his seat forever at the right hand of God." What the passage indicates, is that Jesus has completed his work here among us; now, he is simply waiting for the outcome of his work. The outcome is our lives; he's waiting to see if we accept or reject all that he has done for us, and we can be certain that he won't return anytime before the outcome is known. That's why the Mass is not a new sacrifice each time it's offered; yet another sacrifice is not necessary, because Jesus' work here is done, he has overcome the power of death with the power of the cross. But the extension of the one sacrifice is *very* necessary, because we need the graces which pour out *from the cross*, through the altar, so that our lives, with Jesus' help, will achieve the desired outcome. Another lesson from the fig tree: bloom in the proper season. The fig tree's branches become tender and spout leaves as summer nears, because spring and summer are conducive to growth. Now is the time for us to bloom in our faith: now is when we have Masses offered at all times imaginable, now is the time when the priests are sitting in the confessional for several hours a week to absolve sins; now is the time when Saint Mary and Saint Michael and Saint Joseph and a whole huge array of saints are interceding for us, that we will accept Jesus' offer. We may not have control over all the events in our lives, over the end of the world or the end of the world for us as we know it; but we do control our outcome in eternity. It's the one thing which is solely in our hands, and our Lord has told us what he wants the outcome to be; question is, do we want it, for do we want things which delight us now, but which will not satisfy us for an eternity?

The end of the world is a terrifying thought for many people, and I think it's terrifying for a couple of reasons: one, most of us do have a fear of the unknown, even if the unknown is something which looks to be better; we like to know what's coming upon us. But there's also a fear, I think, that we're not quite ready for Jesus' return, that I would do things differently if either the sun suddenly blew out or the stars started tumbling from the sky. The prophet Daniel wrote, "some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace. But 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." In the end, we will have much to rejoice in, if we are wise now, and use this time on earth to show God how deep is our desire for heaven.