

Nineteenth Sunday of the Year (C) – August 11, 2019

Jesus created a fascination, alertness, to the end of time, to his second coming putting us on the edge of our seats because we do not know the day or the hour, but we should always be ready and alert, as today's Gospel reminds us. The early Christians remained on a high state of alert thinking that Christ's second coming was imminent, forgetting that a thousand years are like one day with the Lord, all time is relative. I did some research and discovered that the top 10 grossing films in this decade entertained images of Armageddon, were apocalyptic fantasies. Counting the highest down to the tenth: "Avengers: Endgame," "Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens," "Avengers: Infinity War," "Jurassic World," "The Avengers", "Furious 7," "Avengers: Age of Ultron," "Black Panther," "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2" and finally, "Star Wars: The Last Jedi."

The very terms in our favorite movie titles are very telling: Avengers, force, endgame, infinity war, last, furious, deathly hallows, star wars and awaken. Are we attracted to these movies because we know they will never happen, or do we love them because, somewhere deep inside of us, we do wish for something to break into our world, our routine's and our society's endless downward spiral, witnessed again last week with two more mass shootings this time in Texas and Ohio. Are we out of control, creating our own apocalypse? As I have already said, the early Christians believed the end of time was going to come in their lifetime. They were as weary as we can be in what's going on around us: persecution, bitterness, hatred and division.

We don't like to ponder too deeply, it makes us uneasy, even queasy. We may ponder for awhile on the crazy things that happen in our nation and world, but then we think or believe there is not much we can do (our lack of faith), and once the anger subsides we go back to our normal routines until something or someone else comes along to stir our hearts and emotions, pain and grief, hurt and anger. Surely Jesus is warning us in today's Gospel not to be those kind of people, the kind who simply accept things as they are and do not, through the power of the Holy Spirit, think that they can be a vehicle of grace and change. "Make a ruckus", Pope Francis says! We have all been empowered by the Holy Spirit. We surely know what God expects of us, Jesus has made it crystal clear, so we can't simply wash our hands of responsibility. We are people of hope not inevitability, and our hope is not in vain. If at the end, past the pain and sorrow, lie the open, loving arms first spread wide upon a cross outside Jerusalem, then our destiny is delight and not destruction. We must always be people of hope: hope in the present, the future, in God's eternal love from which we cannot be separated.

Viktor Frankl, in his account of what he learned about human nature in a Nazi concentration camp, 'Man's Search for Meaning', notes that the people most likely to survive that ordeal were those who had something to look forward to – a loved one with whom they hoped one day to be reunited or an enterprise they hoped to accomplish. What we look forward to is so deeply a part of our personality that it impacts our bodily health and vitality. When I speak to the children and young people in the school about what they were looking forward to (especially when the summer break was about to begin) they came alive, found fresh energy. Looking forward to something, someone, gives us life and energy. If you are looking forward to nothing, then life holds no hope for you, and no one should live without hope. I know events can dispel hope from our hearts, but our faith should be able to revive it. When I was growing up preaching could focus just a little too much on "the last things" – death, judgment, heaven and hell (plus one – purgatory). Some may say that today we never talk about them, well I just did! But reflection on our eternal destiny, which should never be far from a Christian's heart, should never, ever blind us to what we see around us, to the injustices that appear on our doorstep each and every day. Our faith should never blind us to reality and to what is required of us as Christ's disciples in the world in which we live.

There can be times when we listen to the Sunday readings and wonder (at least I do) as to what relevance they actually have for us in today's world. I had to read today's extract from the Book of Wisdom a few times before it dawned on me that it features the Israelites at the Red Sea, with pharaoh's charioteers on the horizon, waiting for the divine rescue to come. The Israelites knew their faith was not in vain because God had led them out of the injustice of slavery in Egypt. Faith is not the opium of the people, it is not a gift to keep us quiet and passive here on earth, it is our motivation for truth and justice, and it certainly is not in vain as we know through the power of the Cross and the glory of the resurrection! Yes, without the glory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ our faith would be in vain, empty and meaningless, but the grave is empty, the stone rolled away!

The reading from Hebrews affirms Abraham as our father in faith, and how his past experiences, thinking that he and his wife Sarah could never bear a child, gives him the trust, resolve, and nerve to move into an unknown, and even improbable future. None of us knows what tomorrow will hold, but what we do know is that our faith will sustain us, because God in Jesus can make all things new, all things! Nothing stands in God's way, and so we trust and believe just like Abraham, our father in faith!

And the Gospel teaches us that the way we live the present determines the future, our eternal destiny. This Gospel obviously flows from last Sunday's Gospel about the man building bigger barns without a thought for his eternal soul. Father John Powell, in his book, 'Unconditional Love', tells the story of a young student who was dying of cancer. In the final stages of his illness he came to see Father Powell and said something to this effect:

"Father, you once told us something in class that has made it easier for me to die young. You said: "There are only two potential tragedies in life, and dying young isn't one of them. These are the two tragedies: If you go through life and don't love and if you go through life and you don't tell those whom you love that you love them."

When the doctors told me that my cancer was terminal, I realized how much I've been loved. I've been able to tell my family and others how much they mean to me. I've expressed love. People ask me: "What's it like being twenty-four years old and dying?" I tell them: "It's not so bad. It beats being fifty years old and having no values!"

"For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be." Amen!