

ZE09111101 - 2009-11-11

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-27513?l=english>

# Know That He Is Near, at the Gates

## Biblical Reflection for 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time B

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, NOV. 11, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Today's Gospel story is taken from the most difficult chapter of Mark's Gospel (13:24-32) and is often interpreted as announcing the end of the world.

Mark 13 is often called the "little apocalypse." Like Daniel 7-12 and the Book of Revelation, it focuses on a world of persecution. When we take the chapter as a whole, we will be able to see that we are dealing with the theme of meaning rather than chronology.

Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple (Mark 13:2) provoked questions that the four disciples put to him in private regarding the time and the sign when all these things are about to come to an end (Mark 13:3-4). The response to their questions was Jesus' eschatological discourse prior to his imminent death. It contained instruction and consolation exhorting the disciples and the Church to faith and obedience through the trials that would confront them (Mark 13:5-13).

The sign is the presence of the desolating abomination (Mark 13:14; see Daniel 9:27), i.e., of the Roman power profaning the temple. Flight from Jerusalem is urged rather than defense of the city through misguided messianic hope (Mark 13:14-23). Intervention will occur only after destruction (Mark 13:24-27), which will happen before the end of the first Christian generation (Mark 13:28-31).

No one but the Father knows the precise time, or that of the parousia (Mark 13:32); hence the necessity of constant vigilance (Mark 13:33-37). Luke sets the parousia at a later date, after "the time of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24). See also the notes on Matthew 24:1-25,46.

### Son of Man

Jesus' words in today's Gospel deal with two realities: Jesus himself will fulfill the Old Testament Scripture texts about the end and the disciples are not to worry about the precise time of Jesus' second coming. When we read v. 26, we know that Jesus is the heavenly being who will come in power and glory.

Like Daniel's Son of Man, Mark's Jesus will return and gather his elect "from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky" (Mark 13:27). When Jesus spoke, he didn't paint a glistening future for his disciples. He addressed the very era in which Mark's first readers lived and, indeed, in which we ourselves live. Jesus foretold wars, earthquakes and famines, and identifies these as "the beginning of the birth pangs:" the prophesied events signal the painful advent of the new age, which comes about even as the powers of the old age struggle to prevent it.

Jesus described to the people of his day all the things that would arouse fear in people today: wars, persecution, catastrophes, scandals, and people in misery. Jesus used these predictions of distress as a basis for

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hope. We are invited to fix our gaze on him! I take great consolation in the words of Jesus in today's Gospel (vv.29-31): "When you see these things happening, know that he is near, at the gates. Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

### Eschatological testing

Eschatological testing will take a variety of forms. First, there will be betrayals. Just as Jesus was "betrayed" or "handed over" to the hands of sinners for testing, so Mark's readers will be "betrayed" or "given over" to councils, beaten in synagogues, and called to give testimony before governors and kings. They will be "betrayed" or "given over" to death not only by their enemies, but even by their fathers and children, their own kin!

Second, false Christs and false prophets will appear, to "lead many astray." These deceivers will promise deliverance and perform signs and wonders so as to trick people into abandoning their faith in Jesus.

Third, there will be trials or temptations even for those who enjoy relative peace and stability. Jesus speaks about this last sort of trial in his concluding parable in chapter 13, about a man who goes on a journey, having put his servants in charge and commanded his doorkeeper to "watch" or to "keep awake." The parable suggests that Mark's readers are in danger of failing to "watch," of falling asleep. They are threatened by "the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things," which Jesus elsewhere warns may choke out the seed before it matures.

Mark's Gospel teaches us that all who follow Jesus will be put to the test. They will be tested by great affliction or by powerful seducers who do signs and wonders to lead them astray. They will be tested by the ordinary routines of daily existence and by fleshly desires. Whatever the form of the tests we face, Mark tells us that we must remain vigilant and pray, for if we have divided minds and hearts, we will fail the tests and so be unprepared to greet the master and be vindicated before him when he comes.

We shall be put to the test, but we need not fear, for Jesus has changed forever the context in which testing occurs. Because of his endurance of his own testing, Jesus offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to God, thereby rendering the cult in the Jerusalem temple obsolete. From now on, the appropriate "offerings" of the righteous will be prayers made in the gathered community of believers, rather than sacrifices made in the temple. God accepted Jesus' self-offering as sufficient to atone for human sin; those who follow Jesus have therefore been "ransomed" from wrathful punishment by the just God. They can be confident that they are destined for salvation.

### The community of those who pray

Mark indicates that in the wake of the temple's destruction, the community of those who pray will be the "house of prayer for all nations," the new temple to be raised up by Jesus. Single-minded prayer is the hallmark of this new community, the temple built of living stones. But how might Mark and his readers have understood this notion of "single-minded prayer"? How did one go about praying in such a manner, and what were the consequences of such prayer for daily life? Jesus promised that faithful prayer will be answered, but his promise is qualified: Those who pray must not doubt in their hearts.

In the darkness and anguish of Gethsemane, Jesus earnestly requests that God save him from the agony that lies ahead, and he is fully convinced that God can do so. But at the same time, Jesus submits himself to the will of God his Father. Jesus' endurance, his single-mindedness, his deliberate laying aside of his own vision for himself in favor of God's vision for him is what triumphs in the garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives. For Mark, this prayer in Gethsemane is a model of how "disciples on trial" ought to pray.

### Put to the test

What are the great cataclysmic events that shake us in our world today? How are we being put to the test daily? Are experiences of rejection, or suffering, death or loss, deprivation and emptiness leading us to give up the Word of life that we once received with joy? Are our concerns about money, success at work or in school, health, release from addiction, job security, status and recognition, family or relationships choking out the word of God which has been planted in our hearts? Are we gripped by passions such as anger, grief or lust, which block us from following Jesus? Is there any joy left in our life?

The Good News of Mark's Gospel is that we do not have to replicate Jesus' faithfulness in time of trial by the sheer force of our own will. We do not have to face satanic tests devoid of divine power. Jesus of Nazareth has changed our situation forever. Mark phrases the Good News in terms of the empowering of believers that takes place in prayer. The Christian community is empowered to engage in single-minded prayer that cannot be derailed by fear, grief, persecution, or deceptive powers at work in the world. Jesus has atoned for human sin and undermined the very powers that seek to separate humans from God. Therefore all things are possible when we come to God in prayer.

### Bigger picture

Let us never lose sight of the bigger picture of salvation history as we face the setbacks, losses and tragedies of daily life. As Christians, we are invited each day to respond to the dialectics of hope and gloom, which often have gripped our age. Collective anxiety can easily become mass hysteria in the mist of any crisis.

That is why it is so important to be firmly established in the Word of God, to draw life from that word and live in that Word. It is then that we realize the prophet Daniel's words (12:1-3) in our daily life: "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."

[The readings for the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time are Deuteronomy 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; and Mark 13:24-32]

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