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Viewing History in the Larger Context of God

Biblical Reflection for 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, NOV. 9, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- As we come to the end of the Church's liturgical year, our Sunday Scripture readings are filled with apocalyptic images that may well terrify us with their intensity, honesty, realism and practicality. Apocalyptic writing was popular in Christian circles for a millennium. Major historical crises most often triggered apocalyptic thinking.

Not all uses of the word "apocalypse," however, have to do with a special kind of literature. St. Paul insisted that he received his gospel not from human sources but "by revelation" (Galatians 1:12) and that he went to Jerusalem to meet with other Christian leaders "by revelation" (Galatians 2:2). But as a kind of literature, apocalyptic deals with a revelation, or series of revelations, usually by means of an angel, which discloses the supernatural world beyond the world of historical events. The focus is on eschatology, the end of the world as we now experience it and the beginning of a new world. Usually the transition is described in terms of transformations cosmic in scope and nature, along with judgment of failed persons and institutions and the vindication of God's saints.

Although some apocalypses involve ascensions into another world, both the Apocalypse to John and the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus in Luke 21 (Mark 13; Matthew 24:1-38) join historical events with descriptions of what is going on behind and beyond history. What is going on is mixed with what is really going on, history being set in the larger context of God's purpose, the whole being an extraordinary writing with historical descriptions laced with symbols, signs, and mysterious figures of speech. As strange as this literature may seem to us, it is a dramatic witness to the tenacity of faith and hope among the people of God.

Context

The destruction of Jerusalem is the historical event that prompted Jesus' apocalyptic speech in today's Gospel passage (Luke 21:5-19). Mark, for example, described the desecration of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans (Mark 13:14) as the apocalyptic symbol (see Daniel 9:27; 12:11) accompanying the end of the age and the coming of the Son of Man. Luke (Luke 21:20-24), however, removes the apocalyptic setting and separates the historical destruction of Jerusalem from the signs of the coming of the Son of Man by a period that he refers to as "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24).

Jesus' eschatological discourse in Luke (21:5-36) is inspired by Mark 13, but Luke has made some significant alterations to the words of Jesus found there. Luke maintains the belief in the early expectation of the end of the age but, by focusing attention throughout the gospel on the importance of the day-to-day following of Jesus and by reinterpreting the meaning of some of the signs of the end from Mark 13, he has come to terms with what seemed to the early Christian community to be a delay of the parousia -- the second coming of Christ at the end of time.

Signs of the end

In dealing with the persecution of the disciples (Luke 21:12-19) and the destruction of Jerusalem (20-24) Luke is pointing to eschatological signs that have already been fulfilled. In Luke's text, Jesus speaks in the temple and not away from the temple on the Mount of Olives. The audience for Jesus' discourse in today's Gospel is "all the people" and not the disciples in private (Matthew 24:3) or the original four disciples (Mark 13:3). In today's Gospel (Luke 21:5-19), the signs of the end are threefold: the appearance of false messiahs and false calculators of time and place (8); wars, tumults, and international conflicts (9-10); and natural disasters with cosmic terror (11). The coming to conclusion of God's purpose will affect not just Israel but all nations, not just the nations but also the entire cosmos. There is no area of God's creation so remote as to be unaffected by God's fulfillment of the divine intention.

A time for bearing faithful witness

However, disciples are not to be so preoccupied with these events as to be terrified or led astray by those who claim to have probed the divine mysteries and ascertained the time and place. The important thing to keep in mind is that before the end there is to be a time of witnessing (12-19). Those claiming "The time (kairos=opportune time) is at hand (8) fail to understand that calculations of time (chronos=calendar time) do not lead one to know the fulfillment of God's time (kairos). The present moment is a time for bearing testimony (13). Now is the time to bear a faithful witness to the entire world.

Because of their witness, disciples will be bought before the synagogues and before governors and kings (both realities were fulfilled in the Acts of the Apostles). Hatred, betrayal by relatives and friends, and death await them. There is nothing here of the arrogance of folly we often see and hear in modern apocalyptists, an arrogance born of a doctrine of a rapture in which believers are lifted above the conditions of persecution and hardship. Disciples are not exempt from suffering. In the mist of the crises and storms the disciples of Jesus, then and now, will be given "a mouth and wisdom" (15) for the appropriate message to be delivered. Keep in mind that in Luke, one of the most important functions of the Holy Spirit is to inspire speech.

More than architectural admiration

Today's Gospel scene came at a moment late in Jesus' ministry, and the disciples stood with him on Jerusalem's holiest ground and stared at the majestic temple of Jerusalem, the centre of Jewish culture and religion, Herod's masterpiece of appeasement of the Jews. It was clearly a sight to stir the soul! And yet this group outing to the Temple Mount suddenly turned serious. What began with architectural admiration became a prophetic glimpse of what discipleship would cost those who would bear his name. It would bring public persecution and betrayal by those closest in the circle of family and friends. Now the long-promised Messiah-prophet had come and taken his place in a temple rebuilt for the third time. His very presence was the visitation of God.

Jesus spoke about the earth-shattering catastrophes including the seizure, persecution, deliverance and betrayal of the disciples. He also spoke about the many who will come in his name to bring quick fixes to the great dilemmas of his and our time. Jesus is clearly no stranger to the horrific forces still on the prowl in our world. Their terror, whether cosmic or personal, is overcome by the assurance that he knows his own, even the number of the hairs on their heads. He went to the cross to make that assurance trustworthy. It is not stoic determination that gets us "gain of soul," but faithful reliance on his promise of grace sufficient in weakness, a grace that works in everything for the gain of the soul.

To reject the divine reign Jesus brought would be to bring down the judgment of God. To endure under his gracious reign would be "to gain your souls." Remember that Jesus spoke of the soul not as fixed but "gained." The soul is that inward capacity in which the divine and human connect in a lifelong process of

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anchoring and maturing and enduring--enduring that will not flinch in the face of suffering.

What's in a name?

If apocalyptic literature shocks us, it may well be for good reasons. Maybe we need to be lulled out of our complacent faith and beliefs, our way of living and acting, and realize that time is short, that the Lord truly does come like a thief in the night, that we must radically change our ways today, not tomorrow. The theme of Jesus' words in today's Gospel is that his "name" (which is the equivalent of his mission and his person) will be the cause of disruption.

And yet we often remain so uncourageous, shunning any form of conflict and struggle. We hide our Catholic Christian identity for fear of "offending" others or of being labeled Christian or Catholic. Have we ever stopped to realize that maybe some things in this world are truly worth fighting for, and even dying for? Have we forgotten that those associated with "the Name" will endure persecution?

A lesson

There is also an important message for us in today's second reading from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 3:7-12). St. Paul admonishes the Thessalonians about a specific problem in their community that has grown out of the intense eschatological speculation, namely, not to work but to become instead disorderly busybodies (6-15). Some members of the community, probably because they regarded the parousia as imminent or the new age of the Lord to be already here had apparently ceased to work for a living. They allowed themselves to be overcome with fear and paralysis about the future, and longed for imminent deliverance from the present struggles and suffering. They effectively gave up and used the parousia as an excuse to cease transforming the society in which they lived by their faithful and courageous witness. They busied themselves with all the wrong things!

As we near the end of the liturgical year and are confronted with ultimate things in today's Scripture readings, let us never forget that we are called to give witness through our daily living. Amid painful and prolonged suffering, when there can be seen on the horizon of predictable history no relief from disaster, faith turns its face toward heaven not only for a revelation of God's will but also for a vision of the end of the present misery and the beginning of the age to come. That thought alone is a cause of consolation, joy and hope in the midst of the storms of our times.

[The readings for the 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time are Malachi 3:19-20a; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19]

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

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