

Sermon

Nov 29, 2009

Texts: 1 Thess 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

For most of us here today, life is pretty good. Many of us just celebrated Thanksgiving, with lots of good food in abundance. We have all that we need and much more. We can travel around the world and enjoy life. While we all undoubtedly have problems of different sorts as well, in general we can't really complain. Life is good.

But for the majority of people today, life is not so good. 80% of the world's population lives on less than \$10 a day, and over half live on less than \$3.00 a day. And things have been getting worse. Here in Mexico, for example, it was recently announced by the government that the number of people living in extreme poverty increased by 6 million in the last couple of years, so that now almost 1 in 5 Mexicans live on less than a dollar a day. That's less than 13 pesos a day.

So where is hope supposed to come from? The government? Aid organizations? The church? Can there be any hope for those living in such difficult conditions? And what are you and I supposed to do about it? Give away our money? Stop spending? Feel guilty?

Today's Gospel lesson, like many passages in the Bible, sounds pretty scary. Jesus speaks of distress and fear and destruction coming throughout the world and warns his followers to be ready and to be alert. When people hear such passages today, they usually react in one of two ways: either they become frightened or else they respond in unbelief and perhaps even ridicule, convinced that the things Jesus describes will never happen, at least in our own lifetime.

But it's important to consider the context in which Jesus spoke those words. It was a context of tremendous need and poverty and injustice. People were hungry. They had little food. Life was a constant struggle just to survive. Why? Because of the unjust structures and systems that benefited only a few, those in power. Most of the food that farmers produced was taken from them through taxes, both by the political and the religious authorities. Even those who were fortunate to find work had a hard time getting along, because of low wages and high taxes. Furthermore, poverty led to malnutrition and illness and disease and the breakup of families and a host of other problems. Life was not good.

In a context like that, where is one to put one's hope? In the people in power who are oppressing you? Or in revolutionaries that want to overthrow the system violently? To participate in organized resistance against a power that was as formidable as Rome was equivalent to suicide. People were convinced that the system was not going to change. Things were not going to get better; if anything, they were getting worse. So how does one find hope? And where is that hope to come from?

When we see Jesus' words in that context, then we can understand what he was talking about. Jesus was telling them that there *was* hope, but that that hope was not to be found in the political or religious authorities or the systems of power they had constructed. Rather, it was to be found in God alone, who was not to be identified with any of those authorities or systems. He was saying that, in fact, things would not get better. When he talks about calamities and distress and fear and destruction, he was simply describing what many people experienced every day as they lived under unjust, oppressive regimes. For those people, what Jesus was talking about was not something to be afraid of but something they longed for and hoped would take place soon. That is why he tells them, "when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is

drawing near.” But for those who had power and wealth, who were benefiting from the unjust, oppressive systems that existed, Jesus’ words were not good news. Because they didn’t want anything to change; they wanted everything to stay the same as it was. Because, for them, life was good.

During this period of Advent which we begin today, we reflect on Jesus’ coming into our world. You know, God didn’t send Jesus into our world because everything was fine and dandy in the world, because life was good. God sent Jesus because things were *not* good. Jesus came to establish something different, a new covenant. Alternative communities where people live in solidarity with one another, where they share, where they help one another. Communities of people who do not ally themselves with the unjust, oppressive systems that predominate in our world but instead resist them, longing and working for something different. Like the people in Jesus’ day, we know that, as long as sinful human beings remain in power in our world, there will be injustice and suffering and hardships for many, if not most. But, as Jesus taught, we refuse to let the sinful systems and structures of our world have the last word, instead insisting that God, and the Savior God has sent in Jesus, will have the last word.

So the question Jesus asks each of us today is where we will stand. Will we stand with those who want the world to stay as it is? Those who benefit from the powerful, unjust systems that predominate in our world and want to make sure those systems remain in place? Or will we stand instead with those who long for a different world, those who want to call no one but Jesus lord and master and are anxious for *him* to reign instead of sinful human beings? Will we accommodate ourselves to the powerful, oppressive systems that benefit a few at the expense of the many? Or will we seek to form part of communities that are different, that have different values, that practice solidarity with those in need, guided by Jesus alone and the way of life he embodied in word and deed?

That is the choice that you and I must make every day. The question facing us as we contemplate Jesus’ coming this Advent is whether we really want him to come to make this world a different place, or whether we want him to keep out of our world so that everything remains the same. What do you want? Where do you stand? With those who want this world as it is, or with those who long for a new and different world where no one reigns but Jesus?