

Ascension Sunday

I take as my text today from St. Peter's first General Epistle:

THE end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

On Thursday, we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension, commemorating our Lord's Ascent into Heaven to the Right Hand of God.

From the Christian perspective, the Ascension is an historical event, recorded in the Gospel of Mark and recounted by St. Luke in his Gospel, as well as in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. St. Luke himself did not witness the Ascension but gives an account based on his interviews with those who were witnesses.

To better understand the Ascension, we must understand that it was more than a physical event in which Jesus soared off into the sky to disappear into the clouds; rather it was an event that transcended the physical, that is, it is where Jesus, in His Resurrected Body, was taken up into a cloud and passed out of time and space.

With the Ascension, the Incarnation, when our Lord entered into time and space, is completed; it is that moment in time that we have now celebrated, that moment when Jesus passed from the physical world into the spiritual world.

In truth, the Ascension marked both an ending and a beginning. It was the culmination of all of recorded and unrecorded history since creation and it was the beginning of the *End Times*.

Today's Epistle passage from St. Peter, in light of our Lord's Ascension, brings to us an interesting perspective of the times that we are in now, oft times misunderstood.

Peter tells us that the end is near, and truly, early Christians lived in expectation of, and believed, earnestly, in Christ's imminent return. They took seriously the idea that they were living in the *End Times*.

We hear it from St. Paul in Romans 13:12:

The night is far spent, the day is at hand....

And from St. John in the 2nd chapter of his 1st General Epistle, the 18th verse:

Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.

Now, more than 2000 years later, we may ask: were they mistaken? Did they have it all wrong? When are the *End Times*?

Daunting questions: indeed, it would seem to bring into question not just the thinking of those early converts to Christianity but also the Apostles themselves.

Yet, it is not a matter of questioning them; rather, it is a matter of perspectives. Though, over the centuries, we have come to a better understanding of their perspective, as expressed in Holy Scripture, and in the context of the times, the times in which it was written, as well as in the lives of those early Christians, we are still so distanced from the times we find it ever so difficult to place ourselves into the context of antiquity and ancient Christianity.

Are we, then, in the *End Times*?

Yes, we have entered the *End Times* but not in the popular notion of *End Times*, depicted in movies and modern evangelical writings.

The answer, then, is two-fold: first, we have entered into the final era of our history as God's Creation and, second, we do not know the day and time when our Lord will return for the *Final Judgment*; our Lord was very specific about that:

Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done.
Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away.
But of that day and *that* hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.
Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is.

Though we may be near to the end, Peter is careful to outline a course for us. Whether living in the time in which he was writing, in expectation that Jesus would return at any moment, or today, doesn't matter, for we are all living in that period that is the *End Times*.

The *End Times* is both collective and individual.

The point to which all history moved was the coming of the Saviour of the World, when Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, entered into time, the fullness of time in which all things were fulfilled in Him; the ending of one period and the beginning of another.

While we may accept that the *end is near*, to better understand this concept, we must look at *near* from the perspective of eternity.

In the words of the psalmist:

For a thousand years in thy sight are but as
yesterday when it is past, * and as a watch in the
night.

Still, there is *near* in the individual, personal perspective of eternity.

We live in the *Shadow of Eternity*, each one of us, for our own individual end is always near. None of us knows the day or the hour when he will, in the words of the poet, *cross the bar* and enter the *larger life*.

But, while we live in the *Shadow of Eternity*, still, we must not live in fear or spiritual paralysis.

For this reason, there are four aspects of daily life that, from the Christian perspective, are necessary.

First, a steadiness that can be simply stated, *preserve your sanity*. Don't be swept away by fanaticism; keep yourself balanced and put the affairs of the world into their proper proportion in the light of eternity.

Second, be sober in mind, perhaps best expressed as *preserve a sense of self-restraint and control*. From St. Peter's point of view, it is to approach life responsibly, not without joy, but to avoid being frivolous. We must be mindful of the consequences of what we do in this life in terms of time and eternity.

Third, we must *preserve our prayer life* in such manner that we wisely and seriously pray that in all things God's will be done. It should be our earnest desire through prayer to discover God's Will for us individually.

And, fourth, we must *preserve our love*. We recall from St. Paul that Christian love is the love that never fails. And, Love has such power, according to Peter, as to hide a multitude of sins.

If we love, we can forgive, and it is in forgiving that we are forgiven.

Are we living in the *End Times*?

Yes and Yes!

Yes, we collectively as God's creation are living in *End Times*.

And, yes, as individuals, we are living in *End Times*, as we do not know the day and the hour when God will call us out of this world.

Must we be afraid or live in fear?

For us as Christians, the answer is no.

Knowing the love that God has for us, what is there to fear! If by fear we mean *awe*, then most assuredly we should live in awe of God.

We have been reassured by the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ, not without human witness, that the temporal shall give way to the eternal, and that the best is yet to come.

In the words of our Saviour:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house are many mansions: if *it were not so*, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, *there* ye may be also.

If there is a postscript, it may be this: much has been speculated about the *End Times* in movies, books, and a lot of sermons. The key here is speculation that belies reality.

So many today are paralyzed with fear of the *apocalypse* as has been depicted in the movies, in various novels and evangelical literature, as well as revealed in the *Revelation of John* — the *Revelation of John*, much misunderstood and the cause of so much speculation about the end of the world as we know it.

Divorced by time from the era of apocalyptic literature, we, today, fail to grasp its meaning and, as a result, do not appreciate the nuances and the metaphors that are the basis of its style.

What must not be overlooked is that we Christians have been prepared for this *apocalypse*, for the *End Times*. For both the **collective *End Times*** and our **individual *End Times***.

Peter's first letter to the Church brings us back to earth, to the solid ground of faith that steers us through life and prepares us for our transition from the physical world to the spiritual and our eternal home in heaven.

Through the Holy Scriptures, as affirmed by St. Peter's First Epistle, we are assured, through this New Covenant, of the fulfilment of the Promise made to Abraham, and we find consolation in the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord as we prepare for our own individual *End Times*.

Thus, what is important for us as Christians is not to be caught up in all the *New Age* speculation; but to continue in the Faith, continue in private prayer and corporate worship, and continue in love in the sure confidence that we will be met at the end of this earthly life, and welcomed into eternal life, by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and a loving Father, our Heavenly Father; welcomed, indeed, by a heavenly host of those who have gone before us.