



ACTA  
LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Year C  
Year of Luke

<>

<>

<>

<>

READINGS

*A reading from the prophet Malachi* 4:1-2<sup>1</sup>

*Responsorial Psalm* Psalm 98:5-9. R/. cf. v.9

*A reading from the second letter of St Paul*

*to the Thessalonians* 3:7-12

*A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke* 21:5-19

<>

<>

<>

<>

As a friend once said to me, “Eschatology really is the end!”. There are two Greek words from which the word derives. The

---

<sup>1</sup> The present Lectionary, (using the Jerusalem Bible), and other English translations follow the Latin Vulgate of St Jerome in the chapter and verse numbering of the Book of Malachi. Hence our current Lectionary has Malachi 3:19-20.

Greek word *eschatos* (ἔσχατος) means “end”, “last”, “completion”, “final”. All *-ology* words have at their source the Greek *logos* (λόγος) which means “word”. So *theo* [god]-*logy* [word] means “words about God”, and *psychology* means “words about the mind or psyche”. Eschatology means “words about the end”. There are a lot of them in the Bible and words about the end of creation are plentiful as we come to the end of the Church’s year. While our catechism, as I remember it, has much to say about death, judgment, heaven and hell, preaching on the four last things is not as common as it used to be. But neglect will not totally erase Christian concern. The end of creation is always going to be a topic of discussion among scientists, theologians, spiritualists, and everyone interested in the destiny of the myriads of galaxies visible to our powerful telescopes. The difficulty is to define what we, or more precisely, what the Bible means by “end”. It is, perhaps, clearer if we turn the question around and ask, “What future does God intend for humanity, and, indeed, for all creation?”

### **The End is Nigh!**

It is and it isn’t. Not if we take our Bible seriously. The Hebrew Bible, for the most part, has little or nothing positive to say on the fate of humanity after death. For the most part, the Jewish people, in ancient and modern times, have little reflection on the matter. The ancient Jewish scribes believed that She’ol awaited every Jew, no matter how devout or sinful one was. She’ol was a murky, dark, insubstantial place, a netherworld of emptiness. The belief that it was a fiery place goes a long way back:

*For a fire is kindled by my anger,*

*and it burns to the depths of Sheol,  
devours the earth and its increase,  
and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.*

Deuteronomy 32:22

However, that fiery image is the fire of God's wrath, not a fire tormenting humanity's final destiny.

A more straightforward comment is that the unwise do not know the truth that is clear to anyone of wisdom concerning where all who die end up:

*But he does not know that the dead are there,  
that her guests are in the depths of She'ol.*

Proverbs 9:18

The rich, uncaring nobility of Jerusalem who swan about the city with little or no care for the poor come to a sorry end:

*Therefore She'ol has enlarged its appetite  
and opened its mouth beyond measure,  
and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down,  
her revellers and he who exults in her.*

Isaiah 5:14

The difficulty for those who listened to the great prophet was that everyone, good and bad, went to She'ol. It was that certainty that began to expose a possible weakness in God's steadfast love. If the

uncaring, exploitative rich were destined to go to She'ol, was the God of steadfast love acting justly by consigning the saints to the same dark future as the sinners?

### **God - a Problem?**

Gradually it began to dawn on whoever wrote the book of Job and whoever pondered as did the wise prophet who penned Book of Habakkuk, that there was a problem.

The Book of Job is the Hebrew Bible version of *Waiting for Godot*. Why, some ancients began to ask, do bad things happen to good people? If God's people believe in a loving, merciful, and just God, why do evil people prosper and those who spend their lives doing good end up together with them in the same dismal place? The question raised by human suffering is not a question about the innocence or guilt of human beings. It is a primarily a much more profound question. It is this: **Can the God of steadfast love cope with sin?**

The prayer of patient people, our fathers and mothers in faith, went up to the LORD every day:

*But you, O LORD, do not be far off!  
O you my help, come quickly to my aid.*

Psalm 21:19

Suffering people pleaded with the God of the covenant:

*Make haste to help me,*

*O LORD, my salvation.*

Psalm 38:22

Yet Job pleaded with an inattentive God. A great poet and dramatist created Job and made him the most holy of saints. Yet this totally sinless man is brought down to utter poverty and has no more comfort than a dunghill provided. When the drama forces God to reply to Job's demand to know why good people suffer, God's reply is little more than a cop-out. God's long reply (Job, chapters 38 to 41) to the tortured man's plea means nothing more than "if I told you the deep reasons for my actions you wouldn't understand, for my ways are beyond human comprehension. So there—be quiet and say no more."

Yet Job's questions did not go away. What was the truth about the God of love? What way did the God of steadfast love intend to display that love to heal the pain of the poor? What kind of life did this God promise to those who loved him?

Israel's prophets would not let go of Job's questions. They were anxious to protect God's good name. The cry of Habakkuk can stand for their constant plea:

*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not hear?  
Or cry to you "Violence!"  
and you will not save?  
Why do you make me see iniquity,  
and why do you idly look at wrong?*

*Destruction and violence are before me;  
 strife and contention arise.  
 So the law is paralyzed,  
 and justice never goes forth.  
 For the wicked surround the righteous;  
 so justice goes forth perverted.*

Habakkuk 1:2-4

But answer came there none. Evil triumphed everywhere and God appeared to be powerless, or at least indifferent. Good or bad, everyone ended up in She'ol.

**She'ol** in Jewish understanding, or Hell in Christian understanding, leaves God open to a serious charge: is the almighty, all-powerful God, unable to convert sinful men and women from their evil ways? Worse still, As Habakkuk bluntly puts his question to God:

*You who are of purer eyes than to see evil  
 and cannot look at wrong,  
 why do you idly look at traitors  
 and remain silent when the wicked swallows up  
 the man more righteous than he?*

Habukuk 1:13

In the end, does sin win? How effective is God's love, God's mercy, and God determination to save? Does Satan manage to reap a harvest to fill all his bigger barns? Is God's steadfast love sufficiently steadfast to take away the sins of the world? All the sins?

Everyone's sins? Can God even protect those who try to live according to God's teaching? Is there any point in demanding that God answer Habakkuk's devastating question:

*Are you not from everlasting.  
O LORD God, my Holy one?*

And if God is God, and the LORD is LORD, then surely there is only one answer:

*We shall not die.*

Habakkuk 1:12

On the cross Jesus put the question of Job, and of all righteous people, as plainly as plain can be:

*My God, my God,  
why have you forsaken me?*

Mark 15:34

The eight-century B.C. prophet, Amos of Tekoa, expressed a belief that God must make a distinction between the bad and the good. *The Day of the LORD* was conceived as a definitive coming of God to draw creation to its ultimate destiny. Amos hoped that it would be a time for enemies finally to face the God who does not abide those who crush the poor while going through the motions of religious observance:

*Woe to you who desire the Day of the LORD!*

*Why would you have the Day of the LORD?*

*It is darkness, and not light,*

*as if a man fled from a lion,*

*and a bear met him,*

*or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,*

*and a serpent bit him.*

*Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light,*

*and gloom with no brightness in it?*

Amos 5:18-20

Judgment will come upon the enemies of God and God will stir up nations who will destroy the Babylonians and all such tyrants who brought nothing but destruction on God's people:

*Behold, the Day of the LORD comes,*

*cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,*

*to make the land a desolation*

*and to destroy its sinners from it.*

Isaiah 13:9

This is what God will do, says Isaiah:

*Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them.*

Isaiah 13:17

That, of course, is not much of a solution. That same solution is advocated in Jeremiah (chapters 46 to 51) and in Ezekiel (chapters 25-32). Using power to defeat

power is not a policy that can be sustained, if, that is, the God who is waging the war, is a God whose steadfast love endures forever.

Many of the prophets saw *The Day of the LORD* as a time of peace on earth and goodwill to all. God would initiate a time of universal peace when all foreign oppressors would be wiped out and God's people would live in peace:

*Egypt shall become a desolation  
and Edom a desolate wilderness,  
for the violence done to the people of Judah,  
because they have shed innocent blood in their land.  
But Judah shall be inhabited forever,  
and Jerusalem to all generations.  
I will avenge their blood,  
blood I have not avenged,  
for the LORD dwells in Zion.*

Joel 3:19-21

But that policy is questionable. Is not God the God who saves us from our sins? Can God not rescue evil people from their wicked ways? The destruction of enemies was and is not in accord with a love that is steadfast, a love that endures forever, and a love that is expressed in compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.

Many of the prophets interpret *The Day of the LORD* in another way. They envisage a transformation, a new beginning:

*He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore.*

Isaiah 2:4

God's holy people are asked to walk in a new way, to walk in the peace that takes war off the human agenda:

*O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the LORD.*

Isaiah 2:5

On *The Day of the LORD* all humanity is asked to embrace the path of *shalom*, of peace:

*The haughty looks of man shall be brought low,  
and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled,  
and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.*

Isaiah 2:11

Zechariah, a prophet writing not long after the return from the Babylonian Exile (say, around 500 B.C.) has a simple and utterly beautiful image of what might happen on *The Day of the LORD*:

*In that day, declares the LORD of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree.*  
 Zechariah 3:10

## **A Saving Son**

There is a transformation in the prophetic vision. Whereas *The Day of the LORD* was envisaged as a future time when God would pronounce judgment on the world, a radical new idea began to emerge. *The Day of the LORD* would not be a time. It would be a person. The radical reordering of creation would be the work of a messiah. The word *messiah* means “anointed one”. It is not the name of a person. Rather it is an indication that a person is set apart for a particular task. It is an initiation into a job. Christians are anointed at baptism to indicate that they are called to serve a particular purpose in God’s creation. The Christian enterprise is placed on the shoulders of all who are anointed with the oil of baptism. A single sentence of Pope Francis confirms this ordination:

*In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization.*

*The Joy of the Gospel, §119.*

The practice of anointing persons for public office will be recalled next Sunday when the first reading records that “the elders of Israel ... anointed David king over Israel”. Some prophets envisaged that a descendant of

David would be born into this world radically to transform the world into a new creation, a creation where there would be peace on earth and goodwill aplenty.

Consider Isaiah's vision of the *messiah* to come:

*There shall come forth a shoot  
from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.  
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and might,  
the Spirit of knowledge  
and the fear of the LORD.*

Isaiah 11:1-2

The prophet Ezekiel also talked of a once and future king. In a romantic version of history, Ezekiel presents a version of King David not at all consistent with the facts. But he uses this imaginary perfect king of the past as an image of one who is to come. He introduces the idea that this coming king will be a shepherd to the people of Israel. God will create a new covenant, a covenant of peace. Such will be the appeal of the peace God's shepherd will bring to Israel, that the whole world will come to understand that the way of the LORD GOD is the way of peace and it is a way open to all the nations. This is part of his vision:

*My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.*

Ezekiel 37:24-28.

Similarly Zechariah paints a picture of a future king of peace approaching the city of Jerusalem who “shall speak peace to the nations”:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
righteous and having salvation is he,  
humble and mounted on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall speak peace to the nations.*

## Zechariah 9:9-10

What we must learn is that the prophets express the longings of a war-torn, frequently demoralized people who sought to live by the covenant with God made in the distant past. When the glorious vision of being God's own people turned to defeat after defeat, exile after exile, more often enslaved than free, hope was a rare commodity. God was failing to be the powerful God, the God who saves, the God who shepherds his people into safety and prosperity. It was out of this despair that the idea that, if this world was lost to injustices of every kind, then perhaps there would be a world of God's justice after death. Perhaps there might be a kingdom of God that would reach into an eternity of peace beyond the pain of this world.

It is clear that the fate of humanity after death remained a matter of speculation down to the days of Jesus and beyond. Sadducees, as we have seen, rejected the very idea that God's protective love was effective after death. Pharisees tended to believe that God's shepherding did not cease but was an eternal concern.

The essential element in all debates about "life after death" is a realization that the future belongs to God. The future of creation is a matter for God. It is a question of God's good name: does steadfast love mean steadfast love? What is at stake is God's reputation, not essentially and or primarily our ability "to get to heaven". This consideration needs to be kept in mind when trying to make sense of today's readings.

**A reading from the prophet Malachi**

4:1-2

*Behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.*

The word of the LORD.

The name Malachi means “my messenger” and it may be the name of an actual prophet or it may be a title given by an anonymous author to the book on account of the opening sentence of chapter 3:

*Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.*

Malachi 3:1

Both Jewish and Christian traditions question whether the book was written by a prophet named Malachi (as I think) or whether it is a collection of pieces from various authors with the intention of bringing the so-called Twelve Minor Prophets (from Hosea to Malachi) to a suitable conclusion. While no certainty can be reached on the matter of authorship, the dating of the book to the time of the Persian domination of the province of Judah is agreed by almost all commentators. It was probably written between 515 B.C. and 445 B.C. This may seem to be of little concern to non-Jewish modern readers. But clarifying the authorship and the date of the book helps our understanding of some sentences of deep significance for both Jew and Christian believers.

First, there is the question of marrying out. Malachi raises the question of a Jewish man marrying a daughter of foreign tyrants who have taken over their country:

*Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!*

Malachi 2:10-12

The prophet condemned anyone marrying a foreigner, as does the Book of Ezra in equally abrasive terms. The country was under the colonial rule of Persians. Anyone marrying a Persian woman (and it is the mother who determines one's Jewishness) is in effect a traitor to God. God is the Father and Creator of the people with whom God made a covenant and committed his Presence to Jerusalem's Temple. To marry outside is to betray.

Malachi then condemns another betrayal that men commit against daughters of Israel:

*And this second thing you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour from your hand. But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of*

*you be faithless to the wife of your youth. “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of Hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.*

Malachi 2:13-16

While the matter of divorce is not a concern in today’s readings, it is important to understand that Malachi wrote at a time of intense national suffering when identity and cohesiveness were everyday being challenged. To be unfaithful is, in effect, to court the gods of pagans. To break covenant with “the wife of your youth” was, to break covenant with God. Malachi writes a sentence that rings through the ages:

*Where is the God of justice?*

Malachi 2:17

Today’s reading begins to answer that oft-repeated question. A day will come, a day of fire, when evildoers will be consumed like burnt stubble in a field. The “sun of righteousness” is a metaphor for the dawning of a new day, a new time, when healing will be done. In other words, a day will dawn when God’s justice will prevail over all that is evil. And that is what the Bible means by its insistence that *The Day of the LORD* will turn out to be a day in which God’s love rules this world and the next.

But the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish writings do not have a single understanding of the future. Chapters 7 to 12 of the Book of Daniel offer dizzying prospects dressed up in fantastic visions of great beasts representing great imperial powers that inflict pain on the God’s people. These will be destroyed by a strange figure:

*I saw in the night visions,*

*and behold, with the clouds of heaven  
there came one like a son of man,  
and he came to the Ancient of Days  
and was presented before him.  
And to him was given dominion  
and glory and a kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one  
that shall not be destroyed.*

Daniel 7:13-14

“One like a son of man” means “one like a human being” and “the Ancient of Days” seems to refer to God. It is tempting to suggest that this may be a prophetic sketch of Jesus. But that is to go far beyond the evidence. For one thing, Jesus is not given a throne; he dies on a cross. However, Daniel does suggest that there is a future for humanity and that future is in God’s hands. There will be a turning point in human affairs and the devastation caused by evil exploitative powers will be brought to an end. Isaiah points to a day of universal woe:

*Wail, for the day of the LORD is near;  
as destruction from the Almighty it will come!  
Therefore all hands will be feeble,  
and every human heart will melt.  
They will be dismayed:  
pangs and agony will seize them;  
they will be in anguish like a woman in labour.  
They will look aghast at one another;  
their faces will be aflame.*

## Isaiah 13:6-8

*The Day of the LORD* is a frequent shorthand for a dramatic turning point in human affairs. It will be a time of awesome intervention when God will come to judge and to save. Isaiah's text continues with bad news for the wicked of the world:

*Behold, the day of the LORD comes,  
cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,  
to make the land a desolation  
and to destroy its sinners from it.  
For the stars of the heavens and their constellations  
will not give their light;  
the sun will be dark at its rising,  
and the moon will not shed its light.  
I will punish the world for its evil,  
and the wicked for their iniquity;  
I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant,  
and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless.*

Isaiah 13:9-11

The prophet Joel presents his vision of *The Day of the LORD*, every bit as terrifying as that of Isaiah:

*Blow a trumpet in Zion;  
sound an alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
for the day of the Lord is coming; it is near,  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness.*

Joel 2:1-2

Joel's vision is like that of Malachi but Joel holds out as escape for those who listen to his words:

*“Yet even now,” declares the LORD,  
 “return to me with all your heart,  
 with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
 and rend your hearts and not your garments.”  
 Return to the LORD your God,  
 for he is gracious and merciful,  
 slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;  
 and he relents over disaster.  
 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
 and leave a blessing behind him,  
 a grain offering and a drink offering  
 for the LORD your God.*

Joel 2:12-14

What is clear is that Jewish prophets and visionaries were certain that She'ol did not satisfy their understanding of God's love, or God's justice, or God's mercy. However, no clear and definitive vision of God's intentions concerning the final destiny of creation emerged. To some extent, the writings of the New Testament are similarly confusing. But the resurrection of Jesus provided a degree of clarity beyond the visions of the past.

### **Responsorial Psalm**

Psalm 98:5-9. R/. cf. v.9

*R/. The LORD comes to judge the earth with righteousness.*

*Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,  
 with the lyre and the sound of melody!  
 With trumpets and the sound of the horn*

*make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD! R/.*

*Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
the world and those who dwell in it!*

*Let the rivers clap their hands;  
let the hills sing for joy together  
before the LORD. R/.*

*For he comes  
to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with equity.*

*R/. The LORD comes to judge the earth with righteousness.*

Psalm 98 opens with a call to all the earth to “Sing to the LORD a new song” (as does Psalm 96). In point of fact, the psalm is made up of phrases and lines cribbed from other psalms. While Jewish communities will notice this, the fact that the whole earth is invited to sing will ensure that for most it will be a new song. To teach the world to sing is to proclaim God’s glory among all the nations. God has revealed his righteousness “in the sight of the nations” (verse 2), for the goodness of God cannot be hid. Of course, God will never forget his steadfast love and God’s faithful devotion to the people of the covenant. But the song we must teach the world to sing is that all the earth is embraced by the salvation of God (verse 3).

Even if the voices proclaiming salvation are not heard, then the seas, the rivers, and the mountains will take up the song. For God will come to judge the earth with a judgement that is just according to God’s standards of justice. The psalm invites us to a cosmic celebration, proclaiming that God will judge righteously. God will judge according to God’s standards and

God's standards are set by the very nature of God: the One whose steadfast love endures forever and for every one.

**A reading from the second letter of St Paul**

**to the Thessalonians**

**3:7-12**

*For you yourselves, brothers and sisters, know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.*

The word of the LORD.

Our reading today opens with a command to imitate the behaviour of the person or persons who wrote the letter. The idleness of one brother or sister must not be allowed to influence the corporate intensity of the work of all the brothers and sisters. St Paul often referred to his own work ethic and the author(s) of this letter make the same point as that of the great apostle. The gospel is given freely, not in return for hospitality or any other inducement. Idleness is still idleness, even if one is sitting around waiting for the coming of the Lord.

**A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 21:5-**

*And while some were speaking of the Temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" And he said, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."*

*Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives."*

The Gospel of the LORD.

St Luke wrote these words at least thirty years after the Romans had reduced the Temple of God's Presence to rubble in 70 A.D. What remained you can see today if you visit the Western Wall of the Temple area and admire what is left of the great stones Herod the Great used in renovation just before Jesus was born. The Jewish Revolt against Roman occupation

began in 66 A.D. and ended in 73 A.D. with the fall of the fortress of Masada.

### **A Jesus perspective**

Jesus moves from the historical destruction wrought by the legions of Rome to a universal vision of what God intends for humanity. We have to realise that Luke is writing when Jerusalem has been destroyed and the Christian message has spread from Jerusalem as far as distant Rome. Luke has seen the success and witnessed the persecutions. From the beginning Christians faced hostility, as Luke points out in his Book of Acts. Under Nero, the emperor from 54 to 68 A.D., Christians were blamed for the fire that burned much of Rome in July, 64 A.D. Many Christians were slaughtered following that false accusation. There were intermittent outbreaks of killing and imprisonment under Vespasian (who succeeded Nero), and under his two sons who came after him, especially the second of the two, Domitian. Though small in numbers, a rapidly expanding Christian presence was under constant harassment. Luke's Gospel, from first to last, is a message of peace but he and Jesus before him, well knew, as the poet said, peace comes dropping slow. Jesus was not naïve. He did not underestimate the capacity of the world to resist God's prescription for humanity's wellbeing. Peace is always shelved when war seems a more profitable alternative. Early Christians refused to partake in worship of the emperor, the state and its gods. They refused to join the imperial armies. Instead they preached a gospel of peace. They proclaimed, as St Luke told those who read and heard his Gospel, that Jesus insisted his followers must "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28).

However, notice that Jesus announces that there will be wars and rumours of wars (as is ever the case). But these terrors are not signs that God is ushering creation's final destiny. That remains in God's hands; the end is not subject to human control: the *telos*, the fulfilment of creation's purpose, is not to be expected as an immediate happening. Contrast this with St Paul's teaching to the first Christians in Thessalonica who were anxious about some of their community who had died:

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

I Thessalonians 4:13-16

Clearly, Paul believed that the *telos*, the fulfilment of God's design, would happen almost at once, within his own lifetime. Truth to tell, there was much speculation and concern in early Christian communities concerning "the end of the world". Paul first assures the worried people in his little house church that those who have died have "fallen asleep": they await the hope of resurrection. (It may be of some interest to notice that our word "cemetery" is derived from the Greek. It is from the verb *koimaō*, to sleep. A cemetery is "a place of sleep".)

As the years passed, Christians began to realise that the end was not going to come immediately. The Second Letter of Peter (attributed to but not written by St Peter, the fisherman called by Jesus) has some nervous speculation about the timing of the end. First, there are those who make fun of Christians because they wait in expectation of the end:

*This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation".*

II Peter 3:1-4

Unfortunately, the solution offered by this letter to those who worry about ‘the end’ seems pretty feeble:

*But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the LORD one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The LORD is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the LORD will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*

II Peter 3:8-10

Christians will suffer from internal divisions and external persecutions. Both are a commonplace of Christian experience.

That does not mean that Christians should simply put up with the inevitable. Christians are called to pursue peace, to endure suffering, all the while loving those who persecute and praying for those who destroy.

As we come to the end of the Year of Luke, Luke reminds his hearers and readers that endurance will have a *telos* in God's good time. For Luke has brought us from Galilee to Jerusalem and there we have witnessed a cruel death. But we have been invited to walk a step further, to accompany him to Emmaus and to recognise him in the breaking of the bread.

*Joseph O'Hanlon*