

Homily for November 27, 2019
Wednesday, 34th Week of Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel passage describes the persecution Christians face before the end of the world. When will the Church stop being persecuted? When the Lord returns, but not before.

From the earliest days until the present, the community of Jesus Christ has been the focus of the world's violence. The old principle of "killing the messenger" applies here. The Church will announce, until the end of time, that the old world is passing away, that a new world of love, non-violence, and life is emerging. This announcement always infuriates the world of sin, which explains why the twentieth century was the bloodiest on record—and the one with the most martyrs.

What do we do in the meantime? We maintain a detachment from the world that is passing away, our eyes fixed on the world that will never end. And we speak confidently, boldly, provocatively the message of the Gospel, the dying and rising of the Lord.

In our first reading from Daniel we see displayed in vivid detail the values of the two kingdoms. On the one hand there is King Belshazzar. His appears to be the Kingdom that will not pass away and is characterized by popularity, opulence and excess of every kind. We are told that the king made a great festival for a thousand of his lords, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. Added to this is the idolatrous practice of taking the vessels from the Jerusalem Temple and using them to enhance their blasphemous spectacle.

They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

This represents the central value of the kingdoms of this world. The deification of material goods and the marginalizing at best, or blasphemy, at worst, of the true and living God. But just when the wine is flowing and everyone is feeling just fine, we read:

*Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace, next to the lampstand. The king was watching the hand as it wrote. ⁶
Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him.*

Enter Daniel. He represents the other Kingdom, the one that is always in the minority in a world like this but the one that confidently proclaims trust in the living God and can see through the superficiality of Belshazzar's Feast. When promised with a reward based on the values of this world's kingdom Daniel replies:

Let your gifts be for yourself, or give your rewards to someone else! Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and let him know the interpretation.

Daniel understands something that is expressed throughout the Bible and finds focus in verses like this one from Psalm 49:

So, don't be impressed with those who get rich

*and pile up fame and fortune.
 They can't take it with them;
 fame and fortune all get left behind.
 Just when they think they've arrived
 and folks praise them because they've made good,
 They enter the family burial plot
 where they'll never see sunshine again.
²⁰ We aren't immortal. We don't last long.
 Like our dogs, we age and weaken. And die.¹*

This is exactly the message Daniel relates to the King. The King had exalted himself against the Lord and now is the day of Accounting. A Day that every mortal will have to face when we will give an account before Jesus as to how we lived in this world. The verdict on King Belshazzar is that he is found wanting and his life has been lived with misdirected values that never considered his death.

What we invest our life in makes all the difference to how we will end our lives. As Christians we will always seem a peculiar people in a world that so easily exalts itself against God and places ultimate value in passing fancies.

We on the other hand have been gifted with the perspective that can look beyond the counterfeit values of this world to those true and lasting values of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. May we like Daniel hold fast to him whose kingdom will never end as we live in this world, that is fading away.