

Advent 2, 2017

“Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away.”
(St. Luke 21.33)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Ten years ago an American journalist named Alan Weisman published The World Without Us. It is a non-fiction book that takes a scientific approach to this question: “How long would it take a forest ecosystem to overtake New York City if all the humans suddenly left?” This may seem like a ridiculous question, but it speaks to real-life situations in the cities of Pripyat, Ukraine and Fukushima, Japan. Both were abandoned following nuclear plant disasters and are now surrounded by what is called an ‘Exclusion Zone’. Pripyat was founded on 4 February 1970 in the Soviet Union, to serve the nearby Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. It was officially proclaimed a city in 1979, and had grown to a population of 49,360 by the time it was evacuated, on the afternoon of April 27, 1986, the day after the Chernobyl disaster.

Taking these areas into consideration, along with many other factors in his research, Alan Weisman came to this conclusion: “within 5 years, New York City will start looking like a forest; within 20 years, the skyscrapers will start coming down; and within 200 years, the place will have been fully colonized by trees”. It is an interesting approach, and I only mention it as a way of entering into this morning’s Gospel. Jesus said, “There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations.” Then He said, “Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away.”

The Lord was speaking about His return and the signs in nature that will precede Him. The possibility of such supernatural occurrences in nature is something we are definitely aware of, as a result of the extreme weather events reported on the news. Suddenly, we are recognizing that concrete and steel have limits. They are no longer regarded as indestructible and permanent building materials. More and more, we are seeing the ‘transitory’ nature of this world.

‘Transitory’ is an old word that means: brief; short-lived; temporary; short-term; fleeting; passing away. It is used in the Intercession: “And we most humbly beseech Thee of thy goodness, O Lord, to comfort and succour (help) all them

who in this transitory life are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity". As we ourselves meet with the troubles and sorrows and sickness of our human condition, we are reminded that this earthly life is transitory. We can pretend that everything will continue to be fine; but eventually we will have to accept the reality of our situation. And so the Lord lays it out to us this morning: "Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away".

No doubt all of this sounds very depressing. It is the truth, but sometimes the truth is hard to take! But hold on, there is Hope – Hope with a capital 'H' – an eternal Hope that comes from God. That is the message of both readings. Let's listen again to what Jesus said: "Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away". Regardless of what happens, the Word of God will endure. Why? Because God Himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit is everlasting. He was present 'in the beginning' and by Him everything was created. And, He is the end of all things. He is the 'A' and the 'Z' – or using the Greek alphabet, the Alpha and the Omega.

The thing is, God, the Holy and Everlasting Trinity, is the source of all life and love. And He tells us in His Word that He is at work even now saving, redeeming and transforming. "Behold," He says "I make all things new." By the operation of His Spirit, He is changing us. He is helping us to see things and people differently – from His perspective; from a holy and spiritual one that is of Christ. He is helping us to desire His perfect will and to let go of our selfish ambitions and motivations. This sanctifying work of the Spirit is evidence of the new life – the heavenly and eternal life – the Lord has mercifully given us.

And so near the end of today's Epistle, St. Paul calls Him "the God of Hope": "Now the God of Hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope, in the power of the Holy Spirit." This is critical for us to hear. God wants to fill us with His Hope. He wants us to be full of His joy and peace. As Paul says, "that you may abound in Hope, in the power of the Holy Spirit".

But we cannot abound in God's Hope if we cling to the fading hope of this transitory world. As Robert Crouse explained, the Gospel Lesson tells us that "It is in the devastation of the world, in the destruction of all worldly hopes and expectations, that our salvation appears to us. This speech of Jesus is generally interpreted as a prophecy about the end of time, and all down the centuries there

have been preachers who have sought to discern the signs of the end in their own day....It is, of course, a prophecy about the future, about the end of time; but it is a mistake to read it only in that way. It is also a reference to the present. It is a comment about the world in which we live, and about the way in which we live in it, here and now. It is in fact a supremely relevant and devastating criticism of our own worldliness, our worldly hopes and expectations. The point is, for all of us, and for each one of us individually, this world, and the things of this world must pass away – not just in some vague, remote and unimaginable future, but right now. They are passing things; that is their very nature. They are passing things, and they are passing away even as we grasp them in our hands. No cleverness, no wishful thinking, no advanced technology can make them anything other than transitory things.

(And so) the Advent Hope is an other-worldly Hope. It looks towards a Saviour Who has no worldly power, no worldly recommendation of any sort. It finds in the poor and helpless Infant of Bethlehem the eternal Word of God. It is the contradiction of all worldly hopes and expectations. The heavens and the earth shall pass away, they are passing away at every moment, but the Word of God does not pass away, and as today's Collect expresses it, in that Word we have the blessed Hope of everlasting life."

May we embrace that Word as it has been revealed to us – written down in the Bible; and enfleshed in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...