

“Good Advice, But Bad Direction”

People are forever forecasting the end of time. They use such forecasting to create fear, because if people can make other people afraid, they can control and manipulate them. Such manipulation is experienced when people lift particular sets of passages out of various books, splice them together, and then say: *See! This is what is happening now. The end of the world is near!* Some future predictors are so bold that they dare set the year even the date. It's been going on for centuries and every one of them has been dead wrong!

Fear is a powerful weapon. The more people are made to feel afraid, the more obsessed they become with the end time ... after all no one wants to be “left behind!” And public officials in position of power who govern by fear and hysteria by using key phrases like “mushroom cloud” should be sent to their room without supper. If there is one truth today that speaks volumes, it is this from F. D. R.'s first inaugural speech: ... *that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.*

Another key word loosely thrown around is “apocalyptic.” Today's gospel lesson can be called apocalyptic, because the material dares to forecast the future. Now before you get all excited, let me remind you that this passage was written around 70 AD, the year the Romans destroyed Jerusalem ... the year they dismantled the Temple brick by brick. For the Israelites to witness the destruction of the Temple, it meant that the end was near. After all, the Temple was the center of Israel's hope. The Temple was the place where God chose to dwell ... the God on whom they relied for deliverance from their enemies. The Temple was THE symbol of God's lordship ... and their deliverance from Rome. With the Temple destroyed, the Israelites lost all hope, and therefore, in their way of thinking ... the end had come!

When reading and interpreting today's gospel lesson, we must keep this historical event in mind. Much of apocalyptic literature in the Bible is simply a reflection of historical events that have already happened. People who piece various scripture passages together to predict the future are wrong and they abuse God's Holy Word!

However, I can say that apocalyptic literature in the Bible is very important ... like today's gospel lesson ... it is there for a reason. One purpose of apocalyptic material is to point the believer in the right direction, which is exactly what Jesus was attempting to do for his disciples. The Day of Judgment will come ... at least come for each of us ... ready or not! The “when” is not important ... the ready is! Jesus says, “Be ready.” Have your faith move you in the right direction ... be directed by your faith. Be proud to be called “blessed.” Have a value system that is not shaped by today's world, but a value system shaped by the Law of Moses and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

J. B. Phillips described the value system of a secular society with a set of cynical beatitudes. He writes: *Happy are the 'pushers': for they get on in the world. Happy are the hard-boiled: for they never let life hurt them. Happy are they who complain: for they get their own way in the end. Happy are the blasé: for they never worry over their sins. Happy are the slave-drivers: for they get results. Happy are the knowledgeable people of the world: for they know their way around. Happy are the trouble-makers: for they make people take notice of them.* This is the way it seems for the arrogant, the egotists ... for those who do evil. Malachi said their time will come ... when they will pay their dues.

However, the Lord's Day will be very different for those who bear God's name. J. B. Phillips also has described their lives in far less cynical beatitudes: *Happy are those who realize their spiritual poverty: they have already entered the kingdom of Reality. Happy are those who bear their share of the world's pain: in the long run, they will know more about happiness than those who avoid it. Happy are those who accept life and their own limitations: they will find more in life than anybody. Happy are those who long to be truly good: they will fully realize their ambition. Happy are those who are ready to make allowances and to forgive: they will know the love of God. Happy are those who are real is their thoughts and feelings: in the end they will see the ultimate Reality, God. Happy are those who help others to live together: they will be known to be doing God's work.*

The Blessed and the Unblessed ... they take two different paths in this life. One is self-motivated and seeks the security of this world. The other is faith-motivated and seeks the security of salvation that God's grace provides. One path the world lights with neon signs ... the other, God lights with the teachings of his Son.

The world offers all kinds of good advice. Books are written by the dozens on “how to ...” How to Win Friends and Influence People is full of good advice, but influence through flattery and manipulation is the wrong direction. How

to get rich ... or how to win through intimidation ... or how to buy real estate with no money down ... all may offer good advice, but point us in the wrong direction.

Charlie Brown is the pitcher in a baseball game, and he is saying to himself, "It is the last of the ninth, the bases are loaded, there are two outs and the count is three and two on the batter. If I get him out, we win." The next box shows all of his teammates around him, one saying, "throw him a fast ball, Charlie Brown," another "throw him a curve, Charlie Brown," and other. In the next box, Charlie Brown is again alone on the mound saying to himself, "This world is filled with people who are anxious to function in an advisory capacity." Charlie Brown is right ... advice is cheap ... unless you take it. The trick is to find in what direction it leads. Yes, there is more to life than chasing the golden rabbit ... which reminds me of another story.

In the mid 1980s, a man in England named Williams, an artist, made a puzzle and a publisher asked him to write a story about the puzzle. Williams laughed it off. He wasn't a writer and he wasn't such a good artist. Then he got an idea. He decided to write a story about a rabbit that had to carry a message from the moon to the sun. He wrote the book which included several paintings of this rabbit and clues.

Then he took some gold, and made a rabbit, adorned it with rubies and pearls. One night, he walked across the English countryside and buried that golden rabbit that was valued around \$35,000. The book is filled with clues to the location of the golden rabbit. The book ... the puzzle creates the temptation is to go after the golden rabbit. In so many ways that is the agenda of our times.

We spend so much of our life chasing the golden rabbit ... hoping to find that lost gold mine ... hitting that multi-million dollar lottery ... storing up treasures in our houses that we just know are "antiques" or will be worth something ... someday. We spend a lot of our life looking for that special path that will lead to an easy happy life. Unfortunately, we get all kinds of "good advice" that too often takes us in the wrong direction. We spend a great deal of our life energies chasing after illusions ... things we think or hope are there but aren't ... and never will be.

Television and movies and video games fuel our fantasy world. But real life never happens to us the way we imagine or dream it to be. Take marriage ... when we first fall in love, we fall in love with an illusion ... then over time when the illusion dissipates and reality sets in, we have that "enlightened" choice: "How much reality can I live with?" This is why words like "commitment" are very important. In marriage, one commits oneself to face reality and love in spite of it!

The Bible is a book of advice that points us in the right direction. Malachi brings us not only the last words of prophet, but also the final words of the Old Testament: *Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.* In Luke, Jesus advises his disciples to "take heed that you are not led astray," and then warns them of persecution and advises them to prepare for such. Both passages are apocalyptic because they forewarn. They advise us to get out of the illusions in our life and be prepared for reality. They give good advice to us to keep the Ten Commandments, to be faithful to Jesus' teachings, and not allow ourselves to be seduced by a world holding out lollipops and golden rabbits.

All the "how to books" in the world can never replace the Bible. The Bible is our compass that moves us in the right direction. The Bible does not sugar coat the real world, nor does having faith spare us from trials and tribulations. By following the direction of the Bible, we can gain strength to endure those trials ... we can gain the proper vision to see and accept the difference between illusion and reality ... we can gain the commitment and confidence that we will be forgiven and loved by God in spite of everything. When this happens, we will have the power to stand up and speak the truth in God's name. For now, as always, God needs us to witness God's Word ... not to be ashamed but to be trusting. The Church as today's Body of Christ must speak up so that people are able to live in the right direction.

In the Russian novel, *The First Circle*, a Christian girl named Agnia, takes her friend, an ambitious Communist leader, Yakanoo, to a small church on the outskirts of Moscow. She warns of what will be lost as the churches close, as the bell towers fall into disuse, as the values of religion fall before the pressures of Communism. "When a bell stops ringing," she said wistfully, "and the chimes fade away, you can't bring them back ... and the music is gone forever."

Friends, we are the bells of the gospel. We must ring out the good news lest people grow deaf to God. The value system of being a Christ follower gives us a fuller and satisfied life ... gives us a certain quality that the value system of this world can never give. While others go off chasing golden rabbits, those who believe and follow Jesus Christ already have in their hands the most precious gifts in life: God's love and God's grace. This Thanksgiving week, be a witness to those gifts in word and deed. Amen.