

In our collect this morning, we see a three step movement of the community of God broadly outlining the history of these “last days.” First, Christ has ascended into heaven and taken up His throne from which He reigns over the universe. Second, Christ sends the Holy Spirit to us to comfort, or strengthen, us, and to bring us into holiness so that we would be ready for the third movement. The third movement is our joining Christ in the heavenly places physically, that we would be in His very presence and not, as it is now, still separated from Him by our continuing in this world. Christ ascends, He then sends the Holy Spirit, and then we, as those who continue in faith to God, follow Christ to heaven. We, at this stage of our earthly sojourn, are awaiting that final movement.

But why does Christ tarry? Because the Church, described as “The Bride of Christ” in scripture, is not yet ready to receive her husband. Not all of those who are to be brought in, have been brought in, and those who are in the Church now have not been perfected in holiness to the extent that the Father desires. In other words, there is work to do that is not yet complete. Christ will return when the Church is made ready, but we should not be complacent about this. We need to act with a sense of urgency for as St. Peter says, “The end of all things is at hand.”

Given this renewed urgency, the lessons today instruct us in two things. First in the gospel, Christ warns the disciples that they would suffer persecutions and face opposition to their work, but that His Presence, in the person of the Holy Spirit, would be with them. Second, St. Peter addresses how we are to behave, particularly as the Church, in this “already and not yet” world.

The Gospel lesson begins with the Holy Spirit who is sent to us by Christ from the Father. Let us therefore acknowledge that we are compelled by the Spirit of God in us, to speak to the world about Jesus. The Comforter has come, and He testifies of Jesus Christ. We therefore, as temples of the Holy Ghost, must also bear witness to Jesus. Will our testimony be received with gladness by the world? There are assuredly some “who have ears to hear” that will receive this testimony gladly; the Spirit working through the preached Word will enliven their hearts to receive the witness we bear. But many others will be closed to our message, though over time the Word implanted in their hearts may bear the fruit of renewed life. Salvation isn't about saying the sinner's prayer. Salvation is a lifetime long process. As the saying goes, we *were* saved, we *are being* saved, and we *will be* saved. We therefore are not to give up on those who appear to immediately reject the Word of God, but we should continue in praying for them and in loving them as we are commanded to do.

St. John begins the sixteenth chapter (our lesson begins at the end of chapter 15) with the following: “These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended.” Christ warns the believers that they will be rejected, specifically in this case, by the Jews. This is indicated in that the disciples will be expelled from the synagogues (a uniquely Jewish institution), and by the prediction that those who kill the followers of Christ will believe that

they render service to God, which indicates the monotheistic God of the Jewish and Christian faith. But we should not understand this to be a polemic against the Jews exclusively.

Certainly for the disciples, the Jewish authorities were their most prominent threat, for the Jews were invested most deeply in maintaining the status-quo, and were therefore the most hard-hearted of non-believers. Jesus came from the Jews and was rejected by the Jews, so there were great barriers to overcome in converting the Jews to being followers of Christ.

Christianity was new to the ancient world, and the pagan world surrounding and present in Israel was accustomed to competing religious ideas. So in this non-Jewish world, there was at least a curiosity regarding the beliefs and the message of this new religion. There were new and interesting claims that the followers of Jesus made regarding the founder of this religion, so there was likely a greater openness among the Gentiles than among the Jews. But Christ warns the disciples that they should not expect a welcome from either group. The newly revealed mystery of God in Christ would surely threaten all previous systems of belief, and therefore those in power because of old beliefs would not simply throw up their hands and go quietly away.

However, in the face of such adversity the Truth of God still must be proclaimed, and make no mistake, there are this-world ramifications for all who boldly proclaim Christ as the exclusive way to God. Christ was telling the disciples, and since it is written here in St. John's gospel for all of us to read, He is telling us also, what to expect. Growing the Kingdom of God through the Truth of Christ is a predictably dangerous enterprise. And because of the love of God for us, and because of our reciprocal love for Him, we must be not shrink away from this task in fear. Perfect love casts out fear. We have been warned, but let us not shrink away from the call of Christ to us.

Turning our attention now to the Epistle lesson from the fourth Chapter of St. Peter's first general epistle. St. Peter begins with another warning which echoes the Gospel warning. He states, "The end of all things is at hand." What does He mean by this? St. Peter is writing to first-century Christians who are suffering persecutions because of their professed faith in Christ exactly as Christ had warned them before His passion. The old authorities and powers and dominions, both in this world and in the invisible, spiritual realm, are overthrown and being tossed down. The Gospel was gaining ground everyday, and the demonic oppression that had blinded the eyes of mankind for ages was unable to thwart the victory of Christ. The old order was fading and the new order in Christ was rising. Of course the Church is not primarily about political power. It is about a spiritual power that works itself out into all earthly relationships and therefore tangentially is political.

But Peter refers to this new order in Christ, not as a beginning, but as an ending with an attached sense of urgency for we are instructed to remain sober and to maintain our vigilance in prayer. So not only is the existing order ending, but this new earthly order, founded in Christ and centered in the Church, will also end. It too is only for a time, and we

know that judgement awaits for all at the end of the age. We, the Church, live in an in-between time – redeemed, but not yet glorified. Our destiny, our salvation is sure, but it is not yet realized. Glorification awaits for all of us who love our Lord Jesus Christ. But the promise of such glory is tempered by the danger of falling away. We are guarding the master's house, awaiting His return. We are the virgins charged with keeping our lamps burning until the bridegroom comes. And we therefore maintain our watch in prayer and sobriety so that we would not run out of oil, so that we would be found faithful at the master's return. Our lives as followers of Jesus must not therefore be wasted in dissipation. And we are not to abuse the resources or the grace with which we have been blessed.

With this in mind, it is important to always acknowledge that the call for us to continue in our witness to Jesus Christ is not executed as a solitary endeavor. First, as previously mentioned, we have the Comforter, God the Holy Spirit, to encourage and strengthen us in time of need. It is His testimony to us that has taken root in our hearts and compels us to share the gospel. But also, let us not neglect the blessing of being fellow members in the believing community. We are not alone, but we are a people being built together into the holy temple of the One True God, the Body of Christ, by the Spirit that dwells in us. The love of God must make itself manifest in the Church by the love we have for each other. To claim to love God without backing those words up with actions will surely be called out as hypocrisy, and is therefore possibly worse than not proclaiming God at all. St. Peter obviously knows this and thereby instructs us “And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves; for charity shall cover a multitude of sins.” Please, let us not read into this statement any kind of works based salvation. We should read this simply as the one who truly loves his brother, is blind to his brother's sins. The man versed in Charity, or agape, love, focuses upon meeting the needs of others rather than judging them, and thereby judging himself.

And in the spirit of agape, we are also to be hospitable to each other. In other words, we are to display generosity with what we have and in our support of each other. We are to be genuinely happy for the good of others, and we are to share in each others sorrows as well. This is again a reflection of the principle, “All things come of Thee, O Lord. And of thine own have we given Thee.” Those things with which we have been blessed should be freely shared with others in need. Peter connects the gifts of hospitality to the gifts of ministry given to us in grace. Both are to be given to the community. Open your homes to each other and open your understanding and encouragement to each other. Give of your time to the fellowship. All of us bring something unique and needed to our parish.

What is it that keeps us from being more generous, particularly with each other? May I suggest that we can evaluate our true priorities by examining where we spend our time. It is a good exercise for us every so often to track our activities for a week, to understand where we are actually spending your time. Then follow this up with an idealized list of priorities

and see if the two match up. This information will be interesting for its own sake, but more than that, one should consider what actions to take in order to reprioritize the time one has. You can also perform similar exercises regarding how you spend your wealth.

Now this is a practical self-study, but let us consider the context once again. “The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.” It has been 2000 years since Jesus came to earth, but for us, this alert should ring no less true. For our own days in this life are short. They are short, and yet they have eternal implications. The end for all of us is at hand, so use your time wisely. Do not waste the gifts God has given you. Invest them for the kingdom of God through hospitality; through serving the Kingdom, which can begin right here in this parish; and through nurturing a more intimate connection with God through prayer, Bible reading and study, and corporate worship. Practically, the best way to make a change in your life is to commit to some ministry or kingdom goal. Find a need in the parish and fill it. Find accountability. Take upon yourself a new responsibility.

Now I don’t think that these admonitions are anything that you all haven’t heard before, but yet it is good to be reminded to live with a sense of urgency. We, the Church, are taking over hostile territory when we do kingdom work, and therefore we will experience resistance to our efforts. Remember that the Spirit of God is with us, encouraging and strengthening us for the battle. Remember that the Son of God, seated at the right hand of the Father, reigns in this world by the Holy Spirit and through His Church. Remember that the the end of all things marks the beginning of a fuller life for those who love God and are called according to His purposes. Christ has ascended into heaven and has given us His Holy Spirit to guide us in this present life, so that where He is, we too may eventually dwell. His ascension means our ascension. So regain the urgency, not out of fear, but out of love for God who gave Himself for us and has freely given us all things.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.