

**33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B**  
**The Stiffer the Winter, the More Fruitful will be the New Season**  
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***Introduction***

Scientific and technological progress is registered in the world. Sensitivity to higher values increases, but global injustices, wars, political, economic and social upheavals provoke concerns and dismay. Ideologies considered timeless, are collapsing, certainties are lessening, and political personalities disappear, athletes and movie stars, as soon as the light and cameras that frame them are turned off, fall into oblivion. Everything is called into question. Even dogmas are reread and reinterpreted; certain religious practices that seemed indispensable and irreplaceable turn out to be old and worn; they have had their day and are abandoned.

In the face of these upheavals, someone rebels, another resigns, many are discouraged and think that the end of everything, even of faith, has come. How to evaluate these realities? How to deal with more alarming events? How to get involved in the history of the world, with anguish and fear or with commitment and hope?

The anxieties, pains, the groans of the dying prelude the imminent death; the pangs of a woman in labor herald the beginning of a new life.

Jesus taught us the proper perspective: “When these things begin to happen, stand erect and lift up your heads, for your deliverance is drawing near” (Lk 21:28).

In a world that seems doomed to ruin by its own frenzy of violence, the unbelieving looks down to earth and despair convinced that we are approaching the end. The disciple remains stable in the test, raises his head and in every cry of pain perceives the groaning of creation that “suffers the pangs of birth” (Rom 8:22). In everything that happens, he takes a prelude not to death, but to a happy event: the birth of a new humanity.

***Gospel: Mark 13:24-32***

When Mark writes this page of his Gospel, the Roman Empire has been ravaged by wars, plagues, famines, and disasters. The Christian communities are affected by persecution, and deeply troubled, are no longer able to grasp the meaning of what is happening. The critical situation ignites the imagination of some fanatics who, referring to the announcement of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem made by Jesus, spread predictions of imminent disaster, the end of all creation and the return of Christ in the clouds of heaven.

The balance of the community is shaken and the evangelist feels the need to intervene. To help the Christians to frame events in the right perspective, he inserts a chapter in his book, the thirteenth (which perhaps was not initially planned), in which he refers to the enlightening words of the Master on this apocalyptic theme.

He recalls, first, the recommendation not to be deceived by the foolish discourses of those who preach the imminent end of the world: “Don’t let anyone mislead you . . . . When you hear of wars and threats of war, don’t be troubled: this must occur, but the end is not yet. Nations will fight nations and kingdom will oppose kingdom. There will be earthquakes everywhere and famines, too. And these will be like the first pains of childbirth” (Mk 13:5-8).

It will not be the end but the beginning of sorrows. What to expect: a further worsening of the pain? A dramatic agony of the world, a prelude to the death of creation or a new birth after the pains of childbirth?

Mark answers this question with the words of the Master referred to us in today’s Gospel.

The passage opens with the typical images of the apocalyptic literature: “The sun will grow dark, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall out of the sky, and the whole universe will be shaken” (vv. 24-25).

All the peoples of the ancient Middle East considered the stars of the firmament as deities. They believed that the events of the world depended on them and that they could support life or cause misfortunes and calamities. Therefore they offered them prayers and sacrifices.

Moses had told his people: “When you look at the heavens, and you see the sun, the moon, the stars, and all the heavenly bodies, do not prostrate yourselves to adore and serve them as gods. The Lord your God has left those for the rest of the peoples” (Dt 4:19).

The prophets had severely condemned the worship of the stars, deceptive gods, idols that attracted the astonished gaze of man and made him bend his knees in adoration. They had announced the “shutdown” and assured the “fall”: “The stars and the constellations at night will send forth no light, the sun will be dark as it rises, and the moon shall not shine. The heavens will dissolve; all their hosts shall fall, as the leaf falls from its vine, as the fruit falls from its tree” (Is 13:10; 34:4).

They were not omens of doom, but oracles intended to infuse joy and hope. Isaiah did not mean to say that the cosmic forces would be upset, but that the pagan world, represented by these stars, would be destroyed and people would no longer be enslaved to idols.

Jesus takes these images not to frighten the disciples, but to console them. Plagues, famines, violence, and persecutions which they must confront are signs of a world still dominated by evil, but the end of this painful reality has already been decreed and its decline has begun.

Immediately after the eclipse of these oppressive idols, there appears, with the clouds of heaven and with great power and glory, the Son of Man to establish the kingdom (v. 26). Outside of metaphor: every idol that collapses marks a retreat of the evil one and a step forward of the Kingdom of God; any deceptive light that goes off is a victory of the human over the inhuman.

At this point, Jesus introduces a new apocalyptic image: the Son of Man “will send the angels to gather his chosen people from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the sky” (v. 27).

It seems the prelude to the scene of the final judgment described in the gospel of Matthew. One remains almost holding the breath, waiting for Jesus to continue: “All the nations will be brought before him, and, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, so will he do with them ...” (Mt 25:31-46).

The meaning of the image of the “angels gathering the elect from the four winds” is completely different. It is the announcement of a judgment; there is no mention of any punishment; the message is anything but threatening. It is the comforting answer given by Mark to his communities who are going through a dramatic moment. They are persecuted and suffer harassment; many Christians are put to death and unfortunately among them there are—and this is the most painful aspect of the story—even discord and division. There are even those who betray their brothers and sisters in the faith, report them and accuse them before the pagan courts. Gone are the days when the disciples “were of one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32); now they are at the mercy of the forces of evil, like leaves blown away by their iniquities (Is 64:5). They are upset and unable to react.

To these Christians who are tempted to give up, Mark recalls the promise made by Jesus: the Son of Man will not allow them to be lost; through his angels, he will gather them from the four winds—a symbol of the four cardinal points—and then will gather them from all the earth.

The image is biblical, already put in the mouth of Moses, “The Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples. Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you and from there he will bring you back” (Dt 30:3-4).

The reunion of the disciples will not be in view of the showdown, but for salvation. The angels are identified on the basis of biblical references. The term “angel” does not necessarily mean a spiritual being, as is generally imagined; it means “every mediator” of God’s salvation. In the Bible, it is applied to anyone who becomes a tool in the hands of the Lord in favor of man. Moses who led Israel in the wilderness is called “angel” (Ex 23:20,23); John the Baptist is presented at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark as an “angel” (Mk 1:2). Angels of the Lord are those who cooperate with God’s plan.

The salvation of the brothers and sisters who defected from the faith and dispersed does not occur through a miraculous intervention of God, but through the mediation of angels, “disciples” who, in times of trial, were able to remain firm in the faith. They are the “angels” in charge of bringing the brothers and sisters in the unity of the church.

The message is therefore of joy and hope, not one of the chosen ones will be forgotten, no one will be lost.

The striking image of the violent storm, that frightens and scatters the chicks and the hen that brings them back to herself and keeps them safe under her wings (Mt 23:37) is perhaps the best illustration of this message.

The second part of the passage (vv. 28-32) answers the question that spontaneously comes after hearing the consoling message that the kingdom of evil has come to an end and that the Son of Man will gather the elect in his kingdom: when will this happen?

Humankind is tired of suffering, of enduring the abuses of the wicked, of experiencing that evil continues to rage in the world and in every person.

The answer is given by the image of the fig tree (v. 28), the last of the trees to get their leaves. When these begin to appear, the farmer feels that summer is approaching and enjoys thinking about the abundant crops.

Only the Father and no one else knows the day and hour when the Kingdom of God will have its fulfillment (v. 32). However, there are clear signs that show that the decisive moment is approaching. Christians cultivate the sensitivity and the watchful eye of the farmer who knows how to capture in everything that happens the signs of the new season.