

Our Lord commands us to love Him with everything we are and have, to seek His Kingdom first, to treasure His Word in our hearts. Why? Because everything else will pass away. The things of God remain forever. The things of this world will be destroyed. That's what our Lord teaches in our Gospel lesson this morning.

As we look forward to His return, His advent, we should ask ourselves two questions, then. First, what things of this world are we tempted to put our trust in, to treat as idols? And second, how do we react when those idols are shown to be unstable?

This section of Jesus' teaching comes in the last week of His earthly ministry, the week that began with His triumphal entry into Jerusalem and that will end with Him being placed in a tomb. In that week, one of the things He teaches His disciples about is the end of the world and His second coming. That's what we hear a part of today.

Jesus says that there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars – the sea as well. He speaks of His own return, “coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” This text is one of the reasons why we don't believe in a secret “rapture” of believers; Jesus' return is open and visible for the whole world to see.

While this text does speak to the actual events that will take place on the Last Day, it isn't only about them. The Holy Ghost didn't have St. Luke write this down as mere end-times trivia that will pertain only to the people who will be alive when Christ returns. No, every generation of Christians, from the generation who heard Jesus speak these words to the last generation that will dwell on this earth, are called by Christ to watch, to stay awake, to pray. Our Lord's words are for us today as well.

So then, how do they apply to us today? I'd say that here Jesus is addressing the idols that we would be tempted to put our trust in as time goes on. They're idols, because when they are shown to be weak or unstable or start to go away, people become fearful, because they've trusted in them. Consider the first words of Jesus in our text. “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves.”

For ages, people worshiped the heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars. They saw them as the powers of the heavens, far above man, great and powerful, giving light to the whole world. They also saw them as dependable: the sun would rise and set every day, the moon would go through its regular cycle. Man could base his life on the workings of the heavenly bodies and rely upon them.

When there would be things like eclipses, or shooting stars, it was seen as conflict in the heavens, or the workings of the far off gods, and man would be fearful of what things could happen to him if such cosmic events touched his life. Signs in the heavens made the predictable unpredictable, taking what man believed to be certain and making it uncertain.

I think this is the big connection for us today, though it may be a little abstract. With time, we have learned even more about the heavens and how the sun, moon, and stars move through space. We can predict eclipses far into the future. We can give explanations for events like the aurora borealis we saw not too long ago.

In our day, we don't so much idolize the heavenly bodies and we idolize our knowledge of them, and of everything else. Our understanding, our reason, becomes the thing in which we place our trust. It is for us what the heavenly bodies were for the ancients: something certain, reliable, even powerful. And when our knowledge is shown to be insufficient, or things happen that our reason cannot make sense of, it can create the same fear as the ancients experienced when they saw the heavens change.

One big example of this is the medical field. Many blessings come through it, but for many, it's what they trust in to preserve their lives, and when it fails, fear abounds. The most obvious recent example is of course COVID. Think back to all the fear that went through our society, even our churches, when the pandemic hit. Everything was uncertain. How can we stop the spread? Why don't our usual medicines work? What happens when the store runs out of drugs because everything is made in China?

And of course this isn't true just of COVID. Have you ever been with someone when a doctor tells them "There's nothing more we can do," or "We don't know what's going on."? The fear and anxiety that can come when someone realizes his own mortality and the inability of the thing in which he trusted to save him from death is almost tangible.

This ties in to the next category of idols that our Lord highlights in His teaching here. Jesus speaks of "people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world." The word there for "world" is a particular one in the Greek. It doesn't just refer to the land (as opposed to the heavens) or even to the planet we're on. It has the idea of the civilized world. The world of humanity. The Romans used the word somewhat pridefully to refer to their empire, for example.

This "world" would be all those human institutions that we see as so important, and maybe even "too big to fail." All throughout history, people have idolized such things as permanent and stable. The Jews saw Jerusalem as a lasting city – after all, it was the city of David, and it had the temple of God. But the Babylonians in 587 BC and the Romans in AD 70 showed otherwise, destroying the city and leveling the temple. Rome was referred to by her citizens as "the Eternal City." But when the Visigoths sacked Rome in AD 410, followed shortly thereafter by the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476, the "Eternal City" was shown to be anything but.

And we could talk about the great dynasties of China, and kingdoms of Egypt, the empires of the Aztec and Maya, and so many others. But the point is, all human kingdoms and institutions will eventually crumble. Pinnacles of civilization invariably come crashing down.

Again, this is true for us. Our country is blessed to be celebrating its 250<sup>th</sup> birthday next year. And our Lord has blessed us through our country with many freedoms and opportunities, using her to bring about a lot of good here and throughout the world.

Yet we must not let the fact that God has blessed our country cause us to make our country take the place of God. “Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation,” says the Psalm. The United States of America will not exist forever. And even while she stands, she will fail her citizens, because she is a government of the people, by the people, for the people, and the people are all sinful.

The government isn’t the only institution we can sinfully put too much trust in, either. Banks, insurance companies, supply chains – there are plenty of things out there that, if they fail, cause great fear. God uses them to provide daily bread, but we lose sight of God working through them and put our trust in them directly.

As the Lord clearly states, the things of this life, this world, will fail. The heavens and the earth will themselves eventually pass away. And if even the heavens and the earth will pass away, how much more certainly will the things, the knowledge, the institutions of man pass away? Every idol will fail. This leads to our second question: how do we react when our idols are shown to be idols, to be unstable and having no lasting value? Jesus contrasts two different approaches in His teaching.

The first approach would be that of denial. Jesus says, “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life.” When our idols crumble, we might be tempted to deny it, to numb ourselves to the harsh reality. This might come through things like literal drunkenness or dissipation, which is an obscure word meaning a life spent in pursuit of pleasure.

It might also come through things like hobbies, or recreation, or sports, taken to a level that displaces the things of God. We might also be tempted to be in denial by engaging more and more with the cares of this life, as Jesus says. If I stay extremely busy at work, or with various social groups, or volunteering, then I’m too busy to step back and realize what I’m doing with my life and the limited number of days the Lord has given me.

There are plenty of ways that we might try to deny the reality that the things of this life will pass away, and us as well, if our trust is in them. But denial has two really big problems. First off, reality does manage to slip through the cracks every now and then. This increases fear and anxiety, because it shows that the denial isn’t based on truth. And when it fear and anxiety increase, a person has to double down on whatever he’s using for denial. It can lead to a vicious spiral that destroys the soul.

The second problem that denial has is that it doesn’t actually do anything and therefore it offers no hope. Burying your head in the sand won’t stop the words of God from coming true. No coping mechanism will keep the day of the Lord from suddenly appearing, like a trap, as Jesus says. Denying that idols are idols doesn’t actual change anything. It simply binds a person more strongly to the idol, and to the fate of the idol.

So rather than denial, Christ invites His Christians to trust in Him. Being a Christian doesn’t mean that bad things won’t happen, or that Christians will be spared the suffering that comes when the

things of this life pass away. But it does mean that we know who is in control of all things and who is watching over us. As signs appear in the heavens and the sea rages and the civilized world falls into fear, what does Jesus tell His people to do? “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

We don’t need to draw back in fear, nor try to find some other place to look. We can look at what is going on in the world around us, seeing it through the lens of faith. Whatever happens, God is in control. He uses intermediaries like medicine and government and supply chains to care for us. But if – or when – they fail, God is no less capable of providing for His people.

Furthermore, each day, be it a good day or an ordinary day or a day of great trouble, is a day that brings us closer to the return of Christ in glory. Every time the sun comes up, it’s one sunrise closer to everything being remade in perfection. Every time the sun goes down, it’s one sunset closer to the new heavens and earth being revealed.

As we live each day that the Lord gives to us, we are to spend it in prayer. Jesus tells us to pray for strength to escape all these things. As we pray for strength, the Holy Spirit reminds us that all our strength comes from God. And because God has commanded us to pray for strength, He has therefore also promised that He will give it to us.

This is the strength to escape, not meaning to run away from our troubles, but the strength of faith that remembers that this world is not our final home. As St. Peter reminds us, “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” Our Lord will give us the strength to endure whatever troubles or crosses this world has, and He will bring us to a new and better world, which will last forever.

As Jesus says, then, do not let the troubles of this life bring you fear or worry. All the things of this world are corrupted by sin and will pass away. Don’t try to cling to them as they do, but lift up your heads and look to the new and better things which are yours in Christ Jesus. Hold fast to the word of God, which will endure even when heaven and earth have passed away. And know that every single day brings us closer to our eternal redemption.

In the name of Jesus, amen.