

The day is surely drawing near... as the hymn goes. As we wrap up the year and look towards the coming of Christ, we might be tempted to ask the same questions that the disciples asked Jesus. We hear of His coming and of what will precede His arrival, but when will this be? What signs are going to signify that this has been our last trip around the sun and through the lectionary? Well, Jesus gave the disciples some answers, but I doubt they were answers that made them terribly joyous.

They had false Christs to look forward to. There would be those who would claim to be the I AM, returned, but these aren't Him; these are mere imposters aiming to lead people astray. And sure enough, we have a biblical account of a false Christ and countless more from the text of history of men claiming to be Christ returned, and they led people down the wrong track—only for a moment though, because when they died people lost hope in them.

And Jesus warned of turmoil among the nations and from the earth itself. And sure enough, within 40 years after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, war tore through the middle east. The temple, that which they marvelled at in today's lesson, was torn down. Jesus' prophecy that not a single stone would be left stacked on top of another came to pass.

But, just as Jesus warned, the danger was not just out there—there wasn't just people who would distract others from Christ and chaos to bring the world to despair, but the Christians themselves would be dragged before officials and beaten and tried for their faith. Because they were following Christ, because they lived "in Him" they endured what He endured for His sake, simply because they had His name on them. Neither Romans nor Jews liked the Christians because they had aligned themselves with the Triune God alone, so they were not trusted and in fact hated, just like Jesus said. Even family members would hand siblings over in order to protect their own flesh and blood. The trials of the Christian were both "out there" and "right here."

So the question of “when” which the disciples asked would receive the answer “very soon and even now.” The death of Christ inaugurated the suffering which His followers would endure because of their association with He who suffered first.

And it has proven that the “when” of the end, the signs of the times, would not be like the 59th notch on the clock, after which the minute passes, the hour changes, bringing about something “new.” No, the signs which Jesus warned His disciples about foretold the next season, that of labour pangs, that which would come before Christ’s return. This period would exist, whether people recognized it or not, from the time following Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension until the time of His return.

This means that we shouldn’t be asking “when and what sign,” as if something new were going to happen. Instead, we must look around and recognize that we are living in it. We live amidst false Christs and worldly chaos and personal and intense persecution of the Christian.

False Christs seem a little strange to talk about in this day and age. No one would believe that Christ had secretly returned (well, except for a few religions out there, but they’re well beyond Christian doctrine here). But even if most people don’t proclaim that “Christ” has returned, a false Christ is preached in far too many churches. Whenever Christ is preached as an example or encourager, whenever Christ is preached as a great man—but not God—or preached as a lesser god, whenever a Christ is preached who doesn’t have His purpose on earth as suffering on the cross for the redemption of sinners, then a false Christ is preached. And unfortunately this has led too many astray. No other Christ, except the one with nail marks in His wrists and feet and a wound in His side, will ever return, and no other Christ brings freedom here and now other than the one who died and continues to come to us even today amidst the chaos of our every day lives.

And speaking of the chaos of the world, this one is hard to deny. Between the wars that are seemingly always going on and the international terrorism encompassing the globe and the famine in Yemen which might kill *millions* of people this winter let alone hunger elsewhere in the world and the

hurricanes and floods and earthquakes that seem to be getting greater in number and in strength, we cannot deny that we are living in a crumbling world with grumbling people. We are living amidst a world screaming in birth pains. And they seem to be intensifying.

And amidst that world, Christians are suffering. Certainly it is getting harder to be a Christian in the Western world—our voice is not as predominant as it has been in the past millennia and a half. But you and I are only experiencing a small portion of that which the early church endured, that which the Church around the world endures, even in this minute. And yet, even though we are kept safe from the pain and fear that our brothers and sisters in Christ endure, we suffer as well. We are united with them in the one Holy catholic and apostolic church and thus we mourn and rejoice with them just as they mourn and rejoice with us.

We could just do this from a safe distance, but I would invite you to hear their stories, to intercede on their behalf, to pray that their faith be kept strong, that their proclamation of the Gospel be received even by their enemies, and that their suffering be brief. And let us join in with them, in the face of danger, witnessing to our faith in the crucified and risen Lord here in our communities, so that we may be united with Christians all around the world in the proclamation of the Gospel. It is this that *might* bring persecution close to home for us.

And even when we do not have physical persecutions, when we are not aware of how our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering around the globe for their faith, we too suffer for our faith. The unholy trinity of the devil, the sinful world and our own sinful flesh, they do their best to undermine our faith, to attack it, or to lead it astray. Because we have been baptized, we have a target on our back and we must endure temptation after temptation to forsake Christ's love for us, His victory over sin and death for us; we must endure the temptations to do it our way and by ourselves. Whenever someone puts it in our mind that "Christianity is too good to be true" or "Christ's death can't really cover all your sins—you've got to put a little effort in" or "you've done it now, that last sin was too far" or "it's okay to

mix in a bit of another religion—it feels good so it can't be bad," it is an attempt to draw you away from Christ and His atoning work for you. As are those who sin against you and the seemingly senseless suffering you endure. All of it Satan would use to weaken and in time destroy your faith in Christ.

So the reality is not "when will it happen and what signs should I look for" but instead "Lord, I'm in the midst of chaos and torment. How on earth am I going to get through this? You have said the one who endures to the end will be saved, but Lord I don't know if I can make it. My knees are quaking and my back is aching and my faith might just not be enough."

Well, thankfully, the writer to the Hebrews has provided just what we need to get through as many "last days" as we may need to endure. His text, especially our reading today, is focussed on what a Christian is to do especially "as you see the Day drawing near."

So the question is not when and what, as if something major would change and then the end would finally be here, but instead we ask how. How are we ever going to endure?

For the strengthening of his hearers amidst trial and terrors, Paul, or whoever the author is, emphasizes that the sinless priest laid down His perfect and eternal life as the once-for-all sacrifice. His pure, sinless blood was shed in the place of our blood, muck-and-mired with the sin of our days. With this act, He took away our sins in an unprecedented way, in a way forgiveness had ever been given before; He removed them for all time, thus reconciling us with the one whom we sinned against and ruined our relationship with; the Father and us finally on good terms again thanks to the endurance of Christ on the cross. He endured suffering that He had no right to, and so He stole from us the suffering that by our sinful nature should have been ours. And so, as we endure the brokenness of the world we may be assured that all we endure, from pain and fear to abandonment and even death, is not an expression of God's anger at us. No, we are simply suffering alongside Christ.

And in the midst of this suffering, you can be sure that God's ear is open to your prayers and He Himself present with you. Christ is, flesh and blood, present with you in your suffering. Today we receive

Him and He sustains us as we endure the trials of this coming week; by His presence for you, you are forgiven and renewed, sprinkled clean from your offenses and restored for whatever might come your way.

Because we have been sprinkled clean by His blood and washed in the waters of baptism, we may enter into the presence of God.

This will be made very clear on the last day, when our suffering will be done away with and we will know His paradise for eternity. That day we look forward to because our enduring, as long and painful and scary as it has been, will be over. On that day, we whose names have been written in His Book will find everlasting blessedness and righteousness in Christ. Those who were taken by the chaos of the world will arise from the dust and those who are still alive will alike join them, and all who believe will be in the presence of God forever.

But entering His presence happens not just in the last day, but today also. As we come to church we come into His presence. It's not flashy, it's not even necessarily exciting. But He is here with us, for us. In His Word read and proclaimed He is here to sustain you as you endure. In His body and blood, He is here to refresh you from the trials of the week past and go with you into the week coming. Here Christ is found, the one who endured perfectly. He is found here to endure with us throughout each of our lives, the lives of His beloved.

Because He has redeemed us, we may "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. We may hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." Here in His loving presence He holds us and heals us and forgives us and walks out these doors with us. Here is where you meet Him who will cause you to endure, and so continue coming back so that the days may not prove too much for you; invite those who have faltered and are maybe being overtaken by the worries of the world and the trials of this life, and invite in those who recognize the terrors of this age

but have no hope for something greater. For there is no limit to this grace; it is for all. When Christ comes back, whenever that may be, may He judge many plus many more as His righteous ones, those who trust in Him, those who He has certainly already paid the price for.

So we need not fear Christ's return. The days preceding it might be terrible and trying. They might also look a lot like today. The days might end right after lunch or that last day could be 2000 years from now. Things might seem to be getting worse, and yet that doesn't mean we're getting close to the end—closer, for sure, but there is no sign that we have that tells us we have reached the precipice of time. No, we simply have His promise that His Church and His world will endure suffering, and yet we persist. For everyday we are being tried and tested and everyday we are being sustained by the one who endured to the end. So in fact, we may be saved by His grace. May this hope carry you through whatever is brought your way this week. May His assurance give us boldness to pray: (last verse of the day is surely drawing near.)