

Again, happy new year - liturgical new year that is

As we begin a new year, let us quickly review salvation history

The first age of salvation history was Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, before sin entered the world - they were in perfect harmony with God, with each other, and all of creation - there was the Tree of Life that would allow them to live forever...on earth - this is where our natural desire to live forever comes from - whether it be the Ponce de León and the Fountain of Youth, or wanting grandchildren, or wanting to be famous enough to be remembered in the history books

After the Fall, after sin entered the world, God mercifully kicked them out of the Garden of Eden so they would no longer eat of the Tree of Life and thus live forever in a fallen world where death, sin, and disease constantly threaten our well-being

Thus, the second age of salvation history - this is basically the Old Testament - there was hope - there was hope that the Messiah would come

And Jesus does come - Jesus ushers in the third age of salvation history - Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection allows us to have hope of eternal life in heaven - tradition tells us that the holy souls of the Old Testament had to wait until Jesus' death before the gates of heaven were opened to them - again, as I have mentioned before, this third age is a weird one - we know that Jesus wins the war, but the battle between good and evil rages on - the analogy I have used before is that of a victory cease-fire being declared to end a war, but that the cease-fire is for the next day - so for a day, a soldier needs to keep fighting and try to stay alive until the cease-fire takes affect

So again, in this third age of salvation history, Jesus has declared victory, but the cease-fire has not yet taken place - sin still runs rampant in our world - we still need to fight against evil - the Church reminds us, based on the words of Jesus, that we are in the end times

The fourth age of salvation history will start when Jesus comes back - the general judgment will happen - all human souls will be joined back up with their bodies as we profess we believe whenever we say the Creed - and then everyone will either go to hell or heaven for all eternity

So the prophet Jeremiah writes our first reading in second age of salvation history - after the Fall, but before the first coming of Jesus

Jeremiah for the first 30 chapters writes doom and gloom reminding the people that they have been destroyed and exiled because of their sins - however, by the time we get to our first reading in chapter 33, Jeremiah writes about a day when death, slavery, and exile will be no more

In our reading Jeremiah writes that the Lord will one day fulfill the promise He made to Israel and Judah - this would be the northern and the southern kingdoms

God declares that He will raise up a shoot of David - Jesus is this shoot- Jesus, even though He is born into poverty, through His human parents, Jesus can trace His lineage back to King David

Jeremiah goes on to say that in the days of shoot of David, Judah will be safe and Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish people, will be secure - so there was great anticipation among the Jews for this coming shoot of David, for this coming messiah

Jeremiah prepares the people for the first coming of Jesus - as Christians we believe that Jeremiah was speaking figuratively - we believe that Judah is an image of the Catholic Church - remember Jesus promises Peter in Matthew 16:19 that the gates of Hell will not prevail against the Church - now obviously people in the Church do evil things, but just as Jesus promised Peter that the Church will not error in her official teaching capacity, so too here God is promising through Jeremiah the same thing, that the new Judah, the Catholic Church, will be kept safe Because Jesus was so faithful in fulfilling all of the promises when He came the first time two thousand years ago, we can have faith in Jesus' second coming

Just as Jeremiah in the first reading prepared people for Jesus' first coming, here in the Gospel, Jesus Himself prepares us for His second coming at the end of time

Jesus says there will be signs - however, we need to be careful - there have been hundreds of people in the last two thousand years that have declared that the Second Coming is upon us - however, obviously, all of those have been wrong so far

"Father, but what if Jesus has or will come silently, kind of like He did the first time?" - it is true, two thousand years ago Jesus came to a carpenter and young virgin who were extraordinary in their holiness, but quite ordinary to the rest of the world - other than the angels, the Magi, and the shepherds, Jesus' entry into human history went unnoticed - so couldn't Jesus come again in obscurity?

No - we know from today's reading and from other parts of Scripture that Jesus' second coming will happen to much fanfare - here Jesus says that the Son of Man, Himself, will come in a cloud with power and great glory - the whole world will know when Jesus comes back again

So I think the more important takeaway is that we need to always be ready, ready for Jesus' return; Jesus' return at the end of time - Jesus tells His disciples not to be drowsy from carousing or drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life - so even if we are not carousing around or getting drunk, are we allowing anxieties in our daily life to keep us from preparing our bodies and souls for the second coming of Jesus?

Are we going to be prepared or are we going to be caught by surprise? - Jesus describes His second coming as an assault on everyone - are we going to have the spiritual strength to escape the tribulations and stand before the Son of Man, to stand before Jesus? - it is good to remind ourselves that earth is not our final home - our final home is heaven - it is heaven that we need to prepare for day in and day out

At the end of our lives and especially at the end of time, no one is going to ask about our bank account - but God will ask us about love, how well have we loved one another

In the second reading, in St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul reminds us to allow God to increase the love we have for one another

Loving someone does not mean that you love everything they do - in fact love means in some ways the opposite - St. Paul says to love someone means to help them become blameless in holiness

I was listening to Father Mike Schmitz's Bible in Year podcast earlier this week - oh my gosh - I think I'm two months behind - but anyways, he was saying something to the effect of don't let your kids get away with something you wouldn't want in a friend - yes, sometimes it is hard to discipline and requires a lot of effort - but if they don't receive correction from you, they are going to repeat that behavior and someone who doesn't "have to love them" will be turned off by their behavior - and they will have one less friend in the world because you let that obnoxious behavior continue

But this actually doesn't just apply to parents and children - this applies to all of us - are we willing to love one another enough to help each other grow in holiness? - are we going to help each other shed obnoxious behavior by lovingly correcting them? - but I think the bigger question in a world of pseudo-acceptance, in a world of pseudo-tolerance, in a world of relativism, is: are we going to receive correction from others as an act of love? - or are we going to perceive correction as an act of hate?

We do not know when our lives will end and/or when time will end - we do not know the hour of our deaths nor the hour of Jesus' second coming - so we must conduct ourselves accordingly - we must at all times strive for holiness - we must at all times strive for loving God and our neighbor - sometimes loving our neighbor means tough love and giving correction - we also need to become better at receiving correction - the next time you find yourself saying, "Who does she or he think they are? How dare they say that about me?" - now maybe they are wrong about you, but before you dismiss the correction, double check - they just may be correct

Advent is a penitential season - not as much as Lent, but we do use the color purple in our liturgy for a reason - so as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' first coming, take some time to reflect and see how we can better prepare for Jesus' second coming - is there some bad habits we need to get rid of? - are there some bad habits that are keeping us from loving God and neighbor? - today is the first day in the rest of eternity - we were created for eternity - and we will live for an eternity - the question is, will we spend eternity in heaven or hell? - may we strive, starting now, to prepare for eternity in heaven