

### 33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021 B

Shorter days, growing darkness, bare branches, harvested fields ... the cycles of nature draw our attention to endings. One of the great revelations in Scripture that we may not often think about is that history is linear ... that time is NOT an endlessly repeating circle of aimless events, but rather a STORY that moves towards a conclusion: the end of history which for the redeemed is merely the beginning of endless joy. Salvation history has an *opening act* – creation in love by the eternal God; a *crisis* – the reality of sin that leads to suffering and death; and a *climax*, the suffering, dying, and rising of God’s own Son, redeeming all history in that same eternal love. Christian faith assures us that critical event, the turning point, **has already happened** with the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus. And so each day, we are drawing closer to the *END*, when that same Jesus will return. The troubles and sorrows of the world will NOT just go on and on. Suffering will cease, and a glorious future of peace and life awaits, after our trials.

For the early Christians, this promised return of Jesus was the very heart of the good news. They were few in number; often persecuted and even martyred. So the idea that there would come an END to the world as they knew it – a literal last day – did not bring them sorrow or anxiety. It was a promise that sustained their hope, rooted in the certitude that God is always faithful. But this hope did not make them *indifferent* to the problems of the world. The same hope gave them COURAGE to endure those problems and STRENGTH to help relieve them when they could. Serving a Lord Who is greater than time, they passed through history leaving traces of God’s mercy to reveal that love is stronger than death.

Hope is one of the greatest gifts the Church still has to give to the world – hope that is not only consolation for ourselves but also impels us to share that consolation with others in need of mercy. We are still sent by Christ to witness to what we will soon say after the Our Father: that “we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ” – a witness made visible in service to friend and stranger as stewards of God’s gifts; in prayer and worship; in lives that strive for holiness, seeking a place for our names in the Book of the Living.

The people of God have shown me so many signs of hope over the years, but one in particular comes to mind again today. It was at a funeral some years ago for a young man who died in an accident at only 28. Hundreds of friends and neighbors gathered with the family, surrounding his wife of just a few years and their little girl, less than a year old. It was a beautiful celebration of hope and gratitude for a too-brief but generous life of love and kindness. But what struck me most was that little girl, held in the arms of her mother. Picture her surrounded by tears and grief; yet she was completely at peace, untouched by the sorrow, her innocent smile undimmed. Later, of course, she has come to know her loss and to suffer that sadness; but she is still accompanied by love. That untroubled child's smile is a foreshadowing of our own hope, though as if reflected backwards in a mirror. Today, we know all too well the sorrows and suffering of the world; but one day, we hope to arrive at that moment of restored innocence, untouched by sadness, completely at peace in the embrace of God. In the meantime, we too are accompanied by divine love. *That little girl's smile among the tears is an unspoken prophetic sign of hope, pointing ahead to what we shall be in the presence of Jesus, the Word of Healing and Peace Who does not pass away.*