

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 25th Sunday after Pentecost
November 15, 2015

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There was none like Moses in the Old Testament. And the great Hebrew leader had a flair for the dramatic. In order to impress upon ancient Israel her covenant responsibilities Moses staged a spectacular worthy of Cecil B. deMille. He divided the twelve tribes of Israel into two groups, setting some on Mt Ebal and the rest on Mt Gerizim. Probably none of us had taken Holy Land Geography 101! But thus positioned, the two groups of people faced each other across the valley with the city of Shechem far below on the valley floor. Then Moses instructed the one group to shout *the blessings* upon those who continued steadfast in God's service. Those on the other side of the valley were told to shout *the curses* that would fall upon them that departed from God's ways. The ceremony involved the whole nation, and when it ended, Moses gave the assembly its choice. He said, "I call Heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore *choose life*, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and cleaving to Him, for that means life to you and length of days."

Want to read about this dramatic ceremony? You'll find it in *Deuteronomy* chapters 27 to 30. You may wonder how this dramatic teaching was accomplished without a great P.A. system! But what you may *not* do is dismiss it as some quaint form of ancient superstition. Ever since Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden Almighty God had been preparing His people for the coming of Christ. And the issue Moses presented to the Israelites is the *same issue* that confronts God's people in every age. There is simply no possible compromise between either the full acceptance of Jesus Christ, with the burden of His Cross and its grace, *or* taking our place with those who are against Him. The Cross of Christ will be our blessing and salvation or our condemnation and damnation. It is as Moses said in ancient times: "*Choose life*, that you and your descendants may live. Loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and cleaving to Him, for that means life to you and length of days."

Today's gospel passage describes the end times, the tribulation on earth, and the celestial portents that accompany and follow. It all sounds so strange! A comparatively modern arrogance sniffily claims these descriptions are not to be

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taken literally. But on what basis can we assert early Christians did not take these descriptions literally? And if the early Church, inspired by the Holy Ghost, remembered Christ talking this way, we are on very thin ice indeed to call these descriptions “picture-language” or some other dismissive academic term filled with contempt and derision that says we don’t need to believe this. Again, as with *Deuteronomy’s* description of the dramatic ceremony at Shechem, we are not to dismiss this as some quaint form of ancient superstition.

Here and elsewhere in the New Testament the descriptions of the end times are stern stuff! They are part of the gospel you may skip over when you are telling bedtime stories to children! But then we grow up. And like a good poker player you can only play the hand you are dealt. We are dealt the whole gospel. In fact that is what Catholic means. *Κατά ὅλον* translates “according to wholeness.” You cannot ignore that part of the gospel that talks of the end times. Not any more than Moses could allow ancient Israel to prevaricate in her acceptance of all God had revealed in terms of the people’s necessary conformity to the covenant relationship.

The gospel good news is that the ending of all things will be the consummation of the divine plan to save us through the Incarnation, Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everything is viewed in light of the invitation to Trinitarian communion that comes to us through Christ. It is true that the Last Judgment is often portrayed in art and music (and old-time sermons) with fierce images of sulphur and brimstone. Don’t be put off by that. See it for what it is: an effort to move souls out of the unprepared-ness Jesus Himself often talked about, and into the watchfulness needed on our part. The Last Judgement affirms our faith that Christ will return in glory and will reveal the good each person has done or failed to do. His return will also reveal the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation. The Catholic conviction is that things will not just go on until the last one out turns out the lights! God’s creation will not end with a whimper! Rather, there is a goal, and we will reach that goal for which God created all things. As followers of Jesus Christ, you and I look forward to and pray for that day.