

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 25th Sunday after Trinity
November 18, 2018

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The greatest Old Testament leader was Moses. Long before Cecil B DeMille and Charlton Heston, Bible readers recognized Moses was a showman. He had a flair for the dramatic. He needed to impress upon ancient Israel her covenant responsibilities. So one day he divided the tribes, setting some on Mt Ebal and the others on Mt Gerizim. None of us probably has Holy Land Geography 101 in our academic transcript! But we can imagine the two groups facing each other across the valley between them, with the city of Shechem far below. Then Moses instructed the one group to shout the blessings that fall on those who continue steadfast in God's service. Those on the other side of the valley were told to shout the curses coming upon those who departed from God's ways. (How Moses did this without cell phones and a P.A. system is also left to our imagination.) When the ceremony ended Moses gave the people its choice: "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."

You can read about all this in *Deuteronomy* chapters 27 to 30. But only to your peril may you dismiss it as some quaint form of ancient superstition. For ever since Adam and Eve decided to do it *their* way, and were banished from the Garden of Eden, Almighty God had been preparing His people for the coming of Christ. The issue Moses presented to the Israelites is the *same* issue that confronts God's people in every age. It is precisely the issue at hand for the Catholic Church today. There is simply no possible compromise between 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 which accompany and follow them. It all sounds so strange. A comparatively recent arrogance claims these descriptions are not to be taken

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literally. The people who do this are very often the same ones who dismiss the Lord's warning not to cause little ones to stumble. If the earliest Christians, inspired by the Holy Spirit, remembered Christ talking this way, we are on very thin ice indeed to call these descriptions "picture-language" or, in the phrase I used last Sunday, "a paradigm in our folklore." That is dismissive language that says we don't need to believe it.

The descriptions of the end times here and elsewhere in the New Testament are stern stuff. You skip over these passages reading bedtime Bible stories to children! But then we grow up, and like a good poker player, you can only play the hand you are dealt. You cannot ignore that part of the gospel that talks about the end times. Not any more than Moses could allow ancient Israel to prevaricate in its acceptance of all God had revealed in terms of the people's obligation to the covenant relationship.

So where is the gospel good news? 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 the light of the invitation to Trinitarian communion which comes to us through Christ. We are to accept the invitation as given. It is true the Last Judgment is often portrayed in art and music and old-time sermons with fierce images of sulphur and brimstone. But the motivation was probably in order to move souls out of the unprepared-ness Jesus often talked about, and into the watchfulness needed on our part. Do not put off these predictions of the end times. For doing that very thing the Church today is paying a terrible price in lost and damaged souls. Remember the word "Catholic" means *κατά ὅλος*, **according to wholeness**. The whole Divine revelation includes Our Lord's teaching about the end times.

The Last Judgment 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 in a whimper but in glory. There is a goal and we will reach that goal

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for which God created all things. As disciples of Jesus Christ, you and I look forward to and pray for that day.