

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord.

A priest and a deacon from the local parish were standing by the side of the road holding up a sign that read, "The End is Near! Turn yourself around now before it's too late!" They planned to hold up the sign to each passing car.

"Leave us alone you religious nuts!" yelled the first driver as he sped by. From around the curve they heard screeching tires and a big splash.

"Do you think," said the deacon to the priest, "that we should just put up a sign that says 'Bridge Out' instead?"

In our Old Testament reading, Daniel, now a man well into his 90s, is speaking of the end of times. Just before, he spoke of everything to come from the Babylonian Empire through the Persians, Greeks, Syrian vs. Egyptians, Antiochus, Christ and the fall of the Roman Empire. He was very accurate in his predictions. Now he is prophesying of the very end - a resurrection of good and the evil people, and the general accounting and reckoning of justice that will follow. It will be in a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations.

In our Epistle reading, Paul in his letter to the Hebrews is talking about sin removed forever. There is no need for further sacrifice. Christ's death is entirely sufficient to take care of all previous sins and those sins that we in weakness commit today in our daily lives. God now can and will forgive us if we only put our trust in Christ. Christ alone is our hope and our salvation. "I will put my laws in their hearts, and write them in their minds," a quote from Jeremiah 31 (not long after the time of Daniel).

Finally, in our Gospel reading Mark (or John Mark) who is generally believed to have been an associate of Peter is presenting Jesus' discourse on the second coming. The disciples were dazzled by the sight of the temple in Jerusalem and thought that the end of the temple would mark the end of times. It is easy to understand why uneducated fishermen and workers would believe this. The temple was magnificent. Its stones were white, and some of them were 37' x 12' x 18'. But, Jesus was not just talking about the temple. He was speaking of the real end of times, and was warning that there would be wars, rumors of wars, and others claiming to be the Messiah who would come first. And, all that was just the beginning of the birth of the end.

As we approach the season of Advent all three of today's verses are talking about the end of times, about times of great distress, and to a certain extent how we are to respond to them. Jesus tells us that we are to be alert and on guard, and not to be fooled. And, Paul is telling us that through all of it...the real key then and now is Jesus. In fact, Jesus is our only hope. If we can put His laws in our heart and in our minds, God will claim us as forgiven and among those to be saved. What are his "laws"? They were given by Jesus in Mark 12...just before today's reading in Mark 13. They are the greatest commandments, written on the front of your Bulletin every week and spoken during the service every Sunday. Love God, and love your neighbors as yourself.

Okay, so given all that, an argument can be made that the days are flying by and all around us are moving fast, but many are not aware of what has happened. We have been given a The Word, and now like the deacon and the priest we may want others to learn that a bridge may be missing in their lives.

How do we do this now during times of war and rumors of war, perhaps during the end of times and perhaps not? Loving God, and loving our neighbors as ourselves will always be evidenced by confident faith and taking care of those around us and as far out as we can reach...whether on a sleepy Sunday morning in Thomaston, or off of Cape Spear in Newfoundland where I was standing Wednesday during the strongest storm on the planet hours before a ship began to sink and my Canadian Coast Guard friends had to duck out of our conference to respond.

Loving God and loving all of our neighbors is not always easy. Sometimes it is in fact very hard. Calamities and times of distress are hard to understand, especially when they strike us or our families. Not all Christians behave as Jesus would like. And, even fewer behave well during times of danger. Non-Christians and those weak in their faith and understanding sometimes make the mistake of thinking that some Christians aren't really Christians at all. However, all who seek after Christ try to follow the greatest commandments all of the time. Trying is inevitable when these two are written on our hearts. Success is harder, but trying or at least meaning to try is normal for Christians.

Recently I read a book edited from the writings of Watchman Nee, a Christian who lived in China and died in prison there in 1972. It was given to me by a friend who worries that I'm a bit "happy go lucky" as an Episcopalian and might need a deeper reverence. Its title is "The Normal Christian Life." I initially read it out of a perverse curiosity to see what someone would prescribe for me as a normal Christian life. But, it was not about how to live a normal Christian life. It was about what happens to each of us during our Christian journey - a journey that begins at baptism, proceeds into learning the basics from what Jesus taught, and then moves into trying hard to be "good" on our own but failing, and then trying harder with the help of friends and church and failing, and finally giving our lives to Jesus and letting him direct our efforts at which point perhaps we finally succeed. I don't know about you, but that last is where I struggle and my friend knew it. Giving control of your life to Jesus (or anyone or anything) is scary, whether you live in Thomaston, Newfoundland, or China.

Before World War II, Mr. Nee traveled from China for a year to visit and teach in England where he gained a strong Anglican following. My book was written well after this while he was in prison in 1961 due to teaching about Jesus and the affect that Jesus has on a normal Christian. He would remain there and die eleven years later, like Paul. But, he left behind a body of work that has helped many Anglicans find both a deeper reverence and a better explanation of our journey in life.

Final steps. Wars and rumors of wars. End times. Recently a friend was so distressed over political divides in our country and the unduly harsh rhetoric that she wondered if we were indeed entering end times. She felt that some of the worst rhetoric was coming from people who

self-identified as Christians, and she pointed to recent abuses in the Catholic church as proof that people are losing their way.

It is important to remember that Christians are forgiven; they are by no means sinless. Even with God's laws written on our hearts we as Christians will fail and only reach God's plan for each of us when we really give our lives and actions to Him. In Ephesians there is a famous passage, "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church." It's a wonderful verse with multiple meanings. Aside from being good advice for a husband, it reminds us all that "Christ loved the church". He loved the Church. Think about that in today's context of sinning Christians and end times.

Christ loved the Church. He literally died for it. We have been taught to think of ourselves as sinners needing redemption. For hundreds of years that has been instilled into us, and we should praise the Lord for that as our beginning; but it is not what God has in view as His end.

The Church is not just merely so many 'saved sinners'. It is that; but in God's sight the Church is a divine creation in His Son. The first is largely individual, the second collective and incorporate. The first is negative, belonging to the past; the second is positive, looking forward. The eternal purpose of the Church comes to fruition in the mind of God through His Son, and has as its objective that the Son should have a Body to express His life. Viewed from the standpoint of the heart of God, the Church is something beyond sin and has never been touched by sin.

The love of Christ is what empowers us to write the greatest commandments on our heart. It is what inspires now and during end times. Worrying is not the work of the strong in faith. There will be wars and rumors of wars, and many will claim they are a better way. Be on guard. You have what you need during soft summer days, during quickening autumn days, and during bleak midwinters. Temples will fall and will be rebuilt. For us there is only Christ. Write his laws on your heart. We are already forgiven. But, to be "good" we cannot go it alone. We're not strong enough. Let's resolve right now to give our lives to Him. Let's pray together and alone, talk to each other and argue with courtesy and respect, and let's figure out what he wants us to do. Not because it might be the end of times, but because we each have only one life. We have all been baptized, we all want to write his laws on our hearts, and now let's figure out how to give our lives to him and figure out what he wants each of us to do. Our lives should be signs to others who are in a hurry.

Amen.