

[Readings: Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; Mark 13:24-32]

There is a popular bumper sticker regarding the return of Jesus Christ at the end of time for the General Judgment of humanity. It simply says, "Jesus is coming! Look busy!" Another sticker adds: "And BOY is He ticked off!"

Divine Judgment is real. Our Catholic faith tells us this in the Profession of Faith we proclaim every Sunday: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." We call it Heaven. But there is also a state of existence called Hell. I believe that we have had a taste of both here on earth.

When we are at absolute peace with God in our hearts, when we experience the love, the joy and the laughter of each other, when we sacrifice and give of ourselves so much that it hurts, when our pets love us unconditionally and our friends are there for us, this is only a taste of what Heaven is like.

But when we experience hate, abuse, abandonment and alienation; when we are misunderstood, rejected and shunned by others whom we trusted and loved and thought loved us; when our hearts ache following the death of a child, a spouse, a parent, a dear friend; when we do not seem to have any purpose in life, and all life seems to be one great empty waste; when there is no hope, no health, no income, and no one around who loves us, this is a taste of Hell.

Now take both experiences of Heaven and Hell on earth, and multiply it by eternity, by infinity. Put God into this equation and we can conclude that one day we will be either eternally happy or eternally full of the unending pain of the anxiety of separation from God.

Spoiler alert! The choice is not God's. The judgment is not God's. The choice is ours. And we bring judgment upon ourselves. This too can be Heaven or Hell.

Jesus speaks of the great tribulation in today's Gospel, but believe it or not, this is not a gloom and doom prophecy. It is a message of hope. Jesus calls these apocalyptic, end-of-the-world special effects the "beginning of the birth pangs." All of creation will just be going into labor.

It is time for the Great Birth to take place. This is the moment of the Resurrection of the Dead.

This is what Catholic theology calls the Day of Judgment.

A whole series of books was written based on the prediction of Jesus Christ saying in the Gospel of Luke that, "one will be taken, the other will be left behind." The series inspired the totally fictional "Left Behind" series. These books imply that the souls of the just will be taken from earth in the middle of its earthly existence, with the poor lost souls battling Satan for power here on earth.

I imagine myself standing next to my best friend, who gets pulled up into Heaven, leaving me behind. I look up to Heaven and say, "Aw, Man..."

But Jesus is speaking of the last days. The "Rapture" as some call it, again, with no actual basis in Scripture, will not happen as they think in earth time, but at the end of time. When Jesus returns, time and space are over.

So when the Lord comes at the end of time, you might call it our Second Birthday, or the Day of Our Rebirth. Jesus says in the Gospel of John when He tells His disciples "I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you (John 16:21-22)."

Everything financial and material that we attach ourselves to so dearly in this world is moving in the natural direction of its mortal limits. If we believe there's more to life than this, then we need to give attention to that world beyond this world. The fig tree's lesson is so simple, perhaps it takes a child to understand it.

Famous secular prophets and political pundits have predicted that if and when we engage in World War III, it will begin with unrest in the Middle East. Look around us and around the world to see if that is not in fact happening now.

So far, the Doomsday prophets predicted the end of the world three times. Remember Y2K? Everything was going to ruin on January 1, 2000. Here we are twenty-one years later.

Another false prophet predicted that The End would come on a Saturday evening at 6 PM. That particular Saturday, I had just completed the 5 PM Mass in my last parish. Confessions would follow after Mass. It was 10 minutes to 6. I

had only one customer. She came into the Reconciliation Room and began her confession with these words: "I know the end isn't going to happen at 6 PM. I know this. But just in case, I want to be in a state of grace."

The latest false prediction is December 8th. Only three weeks away. So get your affairs in order! I am already planning on having a big breakfast on December 9th!

The human community -- nations and kingdoms -- will break down. Then the earth will stop yielding food and begin to shake apart. Next, the family will be torn apart from within and the last faithful individuals will be persecuted. Finally, the Temple will be desecrated, and the earth will be emptied of God's presence.

When Jesus says, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place, He means it WILL take place the day that you and I die, the day you and I breathe our last natural breath.

Reading the Signs of the Times may lead us to think that the return of the Lord is imminent, near, at hand. In one way that should scare us, but only if we are not ready and prepared to meet Him.

The last few people I have given the Last Rites to have inspired me with their readiness to meet the Lord. Three months ago, I heard the best comment yet, from an elderly lady, after I gave her Viaticum – the Sacrament that literally means, "On the road with you." She thanked me and then said, "I'm ready... Let's roll!" Those were the same words said on September 11, 2001 by the brave heroes on Flight 99 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania when they thwarted the terrorists on the plane: "Let's roll!"

Jesus certainly will come at the last day of our earthly life, whenever that will be. Will we be ready to meet Him? Let us stay in the race. Let us win the game. Let us receive the crown of eternal life. AMEN!