

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel & St. Thomas More, NYC
November 17, 2019
33rd Sunday of Year C 2 Thess. 3:7-12, Luke 21:5-19

We live in an apocalyptic age. We live at a time when the lines between “us” and “them, however various groups may define the differences between them, have never been sharper. We live at a time when there are some who believe that their insight, their intuition, their experience, provides them with “the answer” to all life’s ambiguities and society’s injustices. And, more than that, provides them with the license to use any means necessary to make matters right. Their number is found among the religious zealots of every stripe in the mid-East, among the anti-abortion extremists who condone the killing of doctors who perform abortions, among those libertarians who believe violence may be used to stop the federal government's encroachment upon their constitutional rights; and among those on the far left who would “cancel,” i.e., dismiss as irrelevant or evil, all those whose beliefs differ from their own. These are the ones who find virtue in violence, or make excuses for extremism, or demonize their opponents, so that wrapped in the banner of their own righteousness, they can dispense themselves from the canons of civility, and seek to impose their way, and there way alone, on all who are so blind or so stupid (in their view) that they cannot see the right path for themselves. They do not allow themselves to become confused by conflicting arguments, or by alternative solutions. Emboldened by the twisted logic of their own extremism, they are not burdened by any self-doubt, but possess that dazzling clarity of vision that eliminates all nuance and complexity. In fact, so enlivened are they by visions of catastrophic proportions, that they consider any innocent blood inevitably shed in the struggle, is but a small price to be paid for the assurance of the final and cleansing triumph awaits the truly “pure of heart.”

Such extremism existed during the time of Jesus. He tells His listeners that all the beauty of the Temple, the very center of their religious, political and cultural life, would be soon swept away in the approaching tide of violence that would grip the nation. A few decades later, religious fanatics called the Zealots would stage a rebellion against Roman rule that would lead to the total defeat of the Jews, and the complete destruction of the Temple. The way His disciples would avoid getting caught up in the escalating cycle of violence would be to remain committed to the teaching He gave them, wherein it is the virtues of justice and compassion that would be the way to deal with the injustices of the day. He says to them, “By perseverance you will secure your lives.” It is not recourse to violence that will bring the kind of change all desire, but only the relentless application of the Gospel truths to the harsh realities of life.

Today's gospel urges us to be committed to the process of involvement, whereby we try to see where we, as Christians, can make a difference bringing the Gospel perspective to bear on the issues of our day—not in some narrow, parochial way that sees our position as the only one having any validity, but as one that offers some genuine possibilities for hope, which some of the more secular, materialistic philosophies of our day are too often incapable of providing. An authentically Christian position is one whereby we recognize that while we do not have a monopoly on truth or wisdom, we do have something vital and necessary to contribute. It is a position that is willing to compromise, and that sees no stigma in accommodation, because it recognizes that people of good will can differ in solving complex issues. Again, it is the religious or political fanatic who demands that his way, and his way alone, be imposed.

Today's second reading presents another possible temptation to avoid engagement with the issues of our day, and that is the escapism of which St. Paul accuses the Thessalonians. The Christians of Thessalonica are not inclined to violence or fanaticism, but so enthralled are they by their hope that the risen Jesus will return any day, that they act as if they need not be concerned with the practicalities of every day life. So, St. Paul has to tell them to keep working, to be concerned about tomorrow, because no one, in fact, knows when Christ will return. For some today, there is still the possibility of a religious escapism from the problems of everyday life, whereby these "holy ones" are inclined to embrace a kind of other-worldly piety. They become so focused on matters religious and spiritual, that they abandon altogether any interest or desire in playing a part in attending to the complex social questions of our day. A sense of cynicism or despair at government's failure to come to grips with seemingly intractable social problems may contribute to the malaise that grips so many of our contemporaries. But government's failure dispenses none of us from remembering that we are still "our brother's keeper." We may try to escape and believe we are actually doing the Christian thing by focusing on our own personal salvation, with no attention to our neighbor's in need, but, as St. Paul points out to the Thessalonians, this is a distortion of the Gospel.

The path of "perseverance," the path that Jesus calls us to follow, is the path between extremism and escapism. So, it is the most difficult path, because it provides neither the impassioned certitude of the zealot, nor the blissed-out comfort of those with their heads in the sand. It is the unglamorous path of daily recommitment to the way of Jesus, the path where each stumbles upon the opportunity to make this world just that much better for having passed through it. We are going through another difficult time in our nation's history, and with whoever wins the presidential election, the country will undoubtedly be more polarized than ever. Now is the time to work together to build our nation, to refrain from demonizing those with whom we disagree, but continuing to work for the protection of the most vulnerable and disenfranchised among us. Let us pray that

the path of perseverance, the path of not giving up hope, be the path we are prepared to walk, because that is the one that Jesus has walked before us, and the one He continues to walk with us.