

Catholics Rejoice at the Destruction of this World

By Pope St. Gregory the Great¹

And there shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars, and upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring, men overcome with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the whole world, for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds with great authority and majesty. And when these things begin to take place, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is coming near. (Luke 21:25-33)

Our Lord and Redeemer, dearly beloved, wanting to find us ready, denounced the evils that would accompany the ageing world in order to restrain us from loving it. He made known what great disruptions would precede its approaching end so that if we chose not to fear God during peacetime, when we were struck by its disruptions we would be afraid of his judgment when it was near.

Just before the passage from the holy Gospel you have just heard, dear friends, the Lord says that *nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes in various places, and pestilence and famine.*² Then comes what you have just listened to: *There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations with perplexity, the roaring of the sea and the waves. ...*

I am saying these things, dearly beloved, for this reason, that your minds may be watchful and disposed to caution, that they not grow lax out of a sense of security and torpid out of ignorance. Let fear make them ever alert, and alertness strengthen them in good works, as they ponder what our Redeemer also speaks of: *Men overcome with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the whole world; for the powers of heaven will be moved.* What does the Lord mean by the powers of heaven if not the angels, archangels, thrones, dominions, rulers and powers? At the coming of the severe Judge they will appear visibly before our eyes, to demand of us an exact account of all the things our unseen Creator patiently tolerates.

After this we read: *And then they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds with great authority and majesty:* in other words, they are going to see in power and majesty him whom they chose not to hear in a state of humility. To the extent that they do not now submit their hearts to his patience, they will then experience his power more exactly.

He said these things about the condemned; words of consolation for the elect follow at once: *When these things begin to take place, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is coming near.* Truth is exhorting his elect by saying, ‘When the disasters of the world become more frequent, when the outraged powers reveal the terror of judgment, lift up your heads, that is, let your hearts exult! While the world which is not your friend is coming to an end, the redemption you have sought is coming near.’... Lift up our heads...to the joys of our heavenly homeland.

Those who love God are ordered to rejoice and be merry at the world’s end. They will soon find him whom they love, while what they have not loved is passing away. It should

¹ *Forty Gospel Homilies*, Homily 1, translated into English by David Hurst.

² Luke 21:10-11.

be far from the hearts of all the faithful who long to see God to grieve over the disasters of a world they know these very disasters are to end. It is written that *whoever wishes to be a friend of this world makes himself an enemy of God.*³ Someone who does not rejoice as the end of the world approaches testifies that he is its friend, and this convicts him of being God's enemy. Let this be far from the hearts of the faithful, let it be far from those who believe by their faith that there is another life, and who love it by their activities. To grieve at the destruction of the world suits those whose hearts are rooted in the love of it, those who do not seek the life to come, who do not even realize that it exists. But we who acknowledge the eternal joys of our heavenly homeland should hasten to it with all speed; we must choose to set out for it very quickly and to come to it by the shortest way. By what evils is the world not oppressed? What sorrow, what adversity does not afflict us? What is our mortal life except a way? Consider carefully, my friends, what sort of thing it is to grow weary with the exertions of this way, and yet to be unwilling that the way be ended!

Our Redeemer makes clear by an apt comparison that we are to tread on and despise the world when he adds, *Look at the fig tree, and all the trees; when they produce their fruit you know that summer is near. So too, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.* He means that just as the coming of summer is recognized by the fruit on the trees, so is the nearness of the kingdom of God recognized by the destruction of the world. These words show that the fruit of the world is destruction: it increases only to fall, it produces only to destroy by its disasters whatever it produces. The kingdom of God is aptly compared to summer, because it is then that the clouds of our sorrow pass away, and the days of life shine with the brightness of the eternal sun. ...

My friends, what we have heard is now clear. Daily the world is oppressed by new and growing evils. You see how few of you remain from a countless people; yet daily afflictions still oppress us, sudden disasters crush us, new and unforeseen misfortunes afflict us. In youth the body is vigorous, the chest remains strong and healthy, the neck is straight, the arms muscular; in later years the body is bent, the neck scrawny and withered, the chest oppressed by difficult breathing, strength is failing, and speech is interrupted by wheezing. Weakness may not yet be present, but often in the case of the senses their healthy state is itself a malady. So too the world was strong in its early years, as in its youth: lusty in begetting offspring for the human race, green in its physical health, teeming with a wealth of resources. Now it is weighed down by its old age, and as troubles increase it is oppressed as if the by the proximity of its demise.

Therefore, my friends, do not love what you see cannot long exist. Keep in mind the Apostle's precept, in which he counsels us *not to love the world or the things in the world, because if anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him.*⁴ The day before yesterday, my friends, you heard that an old orchard was uprooted by a sudden hurricane, that homes were destroyed and churches knocked from their foundations. How many persons who were safe and unharmed in the evening, thinking of what they would do the next day, suddenly died that night, caught in a trap of destruction?

We must reflect that to bring these things about our unseen Judge caused the movement of a very slight breeze; he called a storm out of a single cloud and overthrew

³ James 4:4.

⁴ John 2:15.

the earth, he struck the foundations of many buildings, causing them to fall. What will that Judge do when he comes in person, when his anger is burning to punish sinners, if we cannot bear him when he strikes us with an insignificant cloud? What flesh will withstand the presence of his anger, if he moved the wind and overthrew the earth, stirred up the air and destroyed so many buildings? Paul referred to this severity of the Judge who is to come and said: *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*⁵ The psalmist described it, saying, *God will clearly come, our God, and he will not keep silent; fire will be burning in his sight, and round about him a mighty tempest.*⁶ A tempest and fire accompany the severity of such strict justice, the tempest testing those whom the fire burns.

Dearly beloved, keep that day before your eyes, and whatever you now believe to be burdensome will be light in comparison with it. The prophet says of that day: *The great day of the Lord is near, near and exceedingly swift. The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter; the mighty man will be afflicted there. A day of wrath that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and misery, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of cloud and whirlwind, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry.*⁷ And the Lord says of this day through the prophet: *Yet once more and I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.*⁸

You see how he moved the air, as I said, and the earth did not withstand it. Who then will bear it when he moves the sky? What shall we call these terrors we see but heralds of the wrath to come? We must reflect that these troubles are as much unlike the final one as the herald's role is unlike the judge's power. Give hard thought to that day, dearly beloved; amend your lives, change your habits, resist and overcome your evil temptations, requite your evil deeds by your tears. The more you now anticipate his severity by fear, the more securely will you behold the coming of your eternal Judge.

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⁵ Hebrews 10:31.

⁶ Psalm 53:3 (V. 49:3).

⁷ Sophonias 1:14-16.

⁸ Aggeus 2:6, 21; Hebrews 12:26.