

## ADVENT REFLECTIONS - WEEK ONE

GOSPEL: Luke 21:25-33. *At that time:* Jesus said to His disciples: There shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars, and upon the earth distress of nations, by reason of the confusion of the roaring of the sea and of the waves, men withering away for fear and expectation of what shall come upon the whole world. For the powers of the heavens shall be move, and then they shall see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and majesty. But when these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand. And He spoke to them a similitude: See the fig-tree and all the trees, when they now shoot forth their fruit, you know that summer is nigh; so you also, when you shall see these things come to pass, know that the kingdom of God is at hand. Amen, I say to you, this generation shall not pass away till all things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away.

HOMILY BY POPE ST. GREGORY - First Homily on the Gospels

- I. As our adorable Saviour will expect at His coming to find us ready, He warns us of the terrors that will accompany the latter days in order to wean us from the love of this world; and he foretells the misery which will be the prelude to this inevitable time, so that, if we neglect in the quietness of this life to fear a God of compassion, the fearful spectacle of the approaching last judgement may impress us with a wholesome dread. A short time before He had said: *Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there shall be great earthquakes in divers places, and pestilences and famines* (Luke 21: 10,11). Now He added: *And there shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars, and upon the earth distress of nations.* Of all these events we have seen many already fulfilled, and with fear and trembling we look for the near fulfillment of the rest. As for the nations which are to rise up one against the other, and the persecutions which are to be endured on earth, what we learn from the history of our own times, and what we have seen with our own eyes, makes a far deeper impression than what we read even in Holy Scriptures. With regard to the earthquakes covering numberless city into lamentable heaps of ruins, the accounts of them are not unknown to you, and reports of the like events reach us still from various parts of the world. Epidemics also continue to cause us the greatest sorrow and anxiety; and though we have not seen the *signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars*, mentioned in Holy Scripture, we know, at least, that fiery weapons have appeared shining in the sky, and even blood, the foreboding of that blood which was to be shed in Italy by the invading barbarian hordes. As to the terrible *roaring of the sea and of the waves*, we have not yet heard it. However, we do not doubt that this also will happen; for, the greater part of the prophecies of our Lord being fulfilled, this one will also see its fulfillment, the past being a guarantee for the future.
- II. Moreover, we say this, beloved brethren, to encourage you to unceasing watchfulness over yourselves, so that no false confidence may take possession of your souls, leaving you to languish in ignorance; but that, on the contrary, a true and wholesome fear may drive you on

to do good works. Take special notice of the following, added by our Saviour: *Men shall wither away for fear and expectation of what shall come upon the whole world. For the powers of heaven shall be moved.* What is meant by our heavenly Teacher when speaking of *the powers of heaven*, but the angels and archangels, the thrones, principalities and powers, that will appear on the day of vengeance of that severe Judge, Who will then demand from us with severity the homage and submission, which He now, as our Creator, although unseen, asks for in love as His due. *Then they shall see the Son of Man coming in a cloud, with great power and majesty.* Which means that the people will then see Him, whom in His meekness and humiliations they would neither listen to nor recognize, coming in power and majesty. In that day they will feel the more compelled to acknowledge His power, since in the present time they deny Him, and refuse to submit themselves to His yoke, to which he so patiently invites them.

III. As, however, these words of our Savior are spoken to the lost, so are the following uttered for the comfort of the elect: *When these things begin to come to pass, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand.* Truth Itself teaches the chosen ones in these words, and seems to say to them: When you see the calamities which portend the end of the world increasing; when fear of that awful judgment day takes possession of even the bravest hearts at the sight of the shaken powers of heaven, then lift up your heads, that is, rejoice with your whole heart, because the end of this world, so little loved by you, announces to you the wished-for freedom to be enjoyed by you hereafter. The head is often used in Holy Scripture for the soul, and in this way, by warning us to lift up our heads, it reminds us to rouse up our souls to the thought of the heavenly home which is awaiting us. Those, therefore, who love God, are commanded to rejoice when they see the end of the world approaching, because, when this world, which they have not loved, is destroyed, they will find themselves in possession of Him, Who is the one true object of their love. We are assured that among these true believers, who have a real longing to see God, there is not one who will not be deeply moved by the fearful events accompanying the end of the world. For we know from Holy Scripture that *Whosoever will be a friend of this world, becometh an enemy of God.* (James 4:4). Therefore, to show no pleasure at the approach of the end of the world is as much as to declare the we love this world, and that we are the enemies of God. This wicked clinging to the world must be far removed from the hearts of good Christians, and of those who by faith are convinced that there is another life, and by their good works deserve that life. Let those weep over the destruction of the world, whose hearts are given to it, and whose hopes are fixed upon it, and who, far from seeking this new life, refuse to believe that there will be another life. As for us who believe in this heavenly home and in its eternal bliss prepared for us, let us hasten to reach them. We should wish to attain this home as soon as possible, and endeavor to find the shortest way thither. For, are we not surrounded in this world by a great many misfortunes? Do we not experience many troubles and calamities? What, indeed, is this mortal life but a painful way? Consider, beloved brethren, what folly it would be in a man walking along a toilsome and difficult road until overcome with fatigue, and yet not wishing to see the end of it! Moreover, our Savior teaches us by His wise similitude that this world does not deserve our affection, but that, on the contrary, we

should despise it. He says: *See the fig-tree and all the trees. When they now shoot forth their fruit, you know that summer is nigh. So you also, when you shall see these things come to pass, know that the kingdom of God is at hand.* Is it not as though He said: In the same way that you conclude by the trees bearing fruit that summer is near, so by the downfall of the world you will know that the kingdom of God is not far off? These words show us plainly enough that the fall and destruction of this world are its real fruits, since its rise and increase are closely connected with its fall, and since it brings forth those things only which are destined to perish. If, on the contrary, we consider the kingdom of God, we are aware that we may in all truth compare it with the summer, when all the clouds of our afflictions will be dispersed and be followed by happy days, lighted up by a never disappearing sun of bliss.

- IV. And that we should never doubt these truths, our Lord confirms them with an oath, saying: *Amen, I say to you, this generation shall not pass away, till all things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away.* Among all corporeal things and beings nothing is more durable than heaven and earth; in the same way nothing disappears more quickly than the word. Before the word is expressed it exists, and hardly is it said than it has disappeared; for the word cannot attain its perfection without at the same instant losing its existence. Now *heaven and earth shall pass away*, says the oracle of eternal truth, *but My words shall not pass away.* It is as if our Savior said: Learn ye, that everything among you, that seems to be durable, has not been made to last for ever or to continue without any change; whereas what seems to pass away quickly, is firmly and forever established. For even the words I speak, and which fly away, contain in themselves irrevocable utterances.
- V. Now, beloved brethren, to return to what you have heard about this world being filled with continual daily increasing evils, consider what remains of the immense nation that has sustained the calamities of which I am speaking. Meanwhile, the troubles have not yet left us; we are still oppressed by lamentable and unforeseen calamities, and we are grieved and afflicted by new losses. Strip, therefore, your hearts from the love of this world which you enjoy so little; and for this purpose take to heart the precept of the Apostle: *Love not the world, not the things which are in the world. If any man love the world, the charity of the Father is not in him* (1 John 2:15). What we have experienced these last three days is not unknown to you; how suddenly raging storms have rooted out the largest and strongest of trees, have pulled down houses and destroyed churches! Many of the inhabitants, who at the end of the day quietly and in good health projected new plans for the morrow, were taken away by a sudden death during the night, and buried under the ruins of their dwellings.
- VI. I beseech you, beloved brethren, be careful! If the invisible Judge is letting loose the stormy winds in order to produce these terrible effects; if He only needs to move the clouds of heaven and thus to shake the whole earth, and to overthrow and ruin the strongest buildings; what can we expect from this Judge when in his wrath He comes to take revenge and to punish sinners? If a mere cloud raised by Him against us is sufficient to strike us down, how shall we be able to resist His Almighty power? St. Paul, thinking of the infinite power of the Judge appearing on this awful day, exclaims: *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the*

*living God* (Heb. 10:31). The Royal Prophet expressed himself with the same force, when in his psalm he says: *The God of gods, the Lord hath spoken; and He hath called the earth. From the rising of the sun, to the going down thereof, God shall come manifestly: our God shall come, and shall not keep silence. A fire shall burn before Him; and a mighty tempest shall be round about Him. He shall call heaven from above, and the earth, to judge His people. Gather ye together His saints to Him; and the heavens shall declare His justice, for God is Judge. Hear, O My people, and I will speak; O Israel, and I will testify to thee; I am God thy God. Understand these things you that forget God; lest He snatch you away, and there be none to deliver you* (Ps. 49). It is not without a special reason that this severe judgement will be accompanied by fire and storms; for it will weigh, as in scales, men who were devoured by the natural fire. Therefore, beloved brethren, keep this great day before your mind's eye, and whatever seems difficult and troublesome, will soon become light and easy, when you compare the one with the other. The prophet Sophonias says to us: *The great day of the Lord is near, it is near and exceeding swift; the voice of the day of the Lord is bitter; the mighty man shall there meet with tribulation/ That day is a day of wrath, a day of tribulation and distress, a day of calamity and misery, a day of darkness and obscurity, a day of clouds and whirlwinds; a day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high bulwarks* (Soph 1: 14-16). And the Lord God has spoken of this day through His prophet: *Yet one little while, and I will move the heaven, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land* (Agg. 2:7). But, as we have already remarked, if the earth could not resist the force of the wind set in motion, how will man be able to resist the motion of the heavens? For what are all these terrible events causing us so much uneasiness and fear, but heralds announcing to us the wrath of God following them? From all this we conclude that between the evils oppressing us now, and those which will come in the latter days, there is as great a difference as between the power of the highest Judge and the power announcing Him. Therefore, beloved brethren, think of the last day with renew attention; amend your lives; steadfastly resist all temptations leading you to sin, and wipe out with your tears the sins you have committed. Then the more you have endeavored, through salutary fear, to anticipate the severity of His judgements, the greater will be the confidence with which you will witness the coming of this Immortal King.