

“Rejoice and straighten up!” Luke 21:25-36

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

This Jesus, He really loves you, that’s it! He really cares for you. If only we could fully embrace this wonderful reality. How much would that transform our lives! Our today’s Gospel reading is just one more reminder of that sweet truth.

Where was Jesus when He was saying all these things that we heard today? Mark and Matthew probably give us the most precise answer. Jesus was with His disciples in Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, opposite to the Temple.

What was He looking at? He was looking at the Temple, but also as He spoke all these things, He was looking at – you. You heard it right. He was looking at you. What do you mean, pastor? Think about this analogy, about our church right here.

Here I stand and I can see you all. Who do I speak to when I address you? But of course, and I speak to all of you. Now, imagine that our church building is the history, from Jesus’ time to the end of times.

First pews symbolize the first century, and the last pews the last century, the time shortly before Jesus’ glorious return. The end time, the last days. Now, when Jesus was speaking, He was addressing all His listeners, all His disciples, all His brothers and sisters, from the time when He was among us, to the time when He will again return in His divine glory. Do you get the picture?

What He tells about the last times, He speaks to us as well. To you. We are “one of the last pews”, so to speak. And He wants to warn us and to encourage us. “And

there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves... for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

Those signs, there have been plenty of them during these last two millennia, and there are plenty of them now. What Jesus says is so good. So good for us. What is Jesus saying to us?

That there will be those signs in creation, signs in the world, even the very powers of the heaven will be shaken. All of that have been happening. It is hard to list all the threats that have made people fearful during these last two millennia, but we can list at least a few.

During the most of history people have lived in fears of terrible sicknesses which sometimes wiped out third of even half of population. We have lived in fears of wars and pillaging. We have lived in fears of famines and scarcity, and so on.

We have lived through periods of global cooling and global warming when climate became unpredictable. When I grew up, we had our fears cultivated in our society. That the evil American capitalists will drop a nuclear bomb on us. We were shown documentaries about what happens during and after nuclear blasts. It was scary.

I imagine that on the other side of the fence, or the other side of the ocean the opposite fears were cultivated. Those evil communists with their nuclear weapons... Most of the causes for our fear have been around for a long time, but I guess there is some novelty in what we experience nowadays. What it is? Can you guess?

For the majority of human history all those scary experiences were the part and parcel of human existence. People were killed in armed conflicts, they were killed by diseases, they were killed by famines caused by natural disasters, and so on.

Which meant that during the majority of history we understood how fragile and how unpredictable our lives are. That we are not in control. That we are at mercy of powers and forces which we cannot even hope to control.

So, humanity was always looking for someone more powerful, someone who is in control to help us, be it our Christian God or some other deity. But then during the last couple of hundred years that changed and changed dramatically.

Advances in science and technology changed that. So many of things that used to be outside of our control, we learned how to be their masters. Even God wasn't needed anymore, we had become almost like gods.

During the last more than half a century we have gradually forgotten about our fragility, about our creaturely limitations, about the unpredictability of our existence and our dependence on forces much greater than ourselves, about the fact that our

lives could be over... tomorrow, or today. But lately we have been reminded about these realities again. The science and technology which promised that they will make us like gods have failed. Hoped for saviours have turned out to be captors.

Surely, they have made our lives a whole lot better, no doubt. But they have also created a whole new set of realities to fear from. Perhaps, climate change, artificially created viruses, pollution of the earth, rapidly growing surveillance and digital control, rise of totalitarian regimes and similar tendencies, even in the West.

But the novelty in today's situation is the fact that so many have excluded God from their lives. And now they are facing all of this – how? On their own. Whom to trust? On whom to rely? Where to look for help? Where is any hope?

Trust in any human institution today is record low. We don't know what to believe, whom to trust, we are flooded with contradictory information. Everything seems spiralling out of control... and it may feel like the powers of heaven are shaking.

Then why would I say earlier that this is good, so good? It has to do with our attitudes towards what is happening; because of two diametrically opposite attitudes that such calamities, disasters and existential threats can invoke. One was this:

“People [are] fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world.” People are scared and anxious, panicking about their future. An in light of what we discussed, that is quite understandable. That is to great extent the mood of today.

But then, and this is what is so good, there is another alternative. “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” This is it! From Jesus to you!

How do we as Christians are to respond when the foundations of the world are shaking? We are to rejoice, straighten up and raise our heads, because it serves us as a reminder that our redemption, that our union with the Lord Jesus is nearby.

When you watch the news, or read the newspaper, when you notice the world spinning out of control, when what has been stable is collapsing – surely, humanely speaking, not fun, not the most comfortable situation, but for us that is it.

A reminder that our Lord Jesus is coming to restore the goodness of His creation, and that there will be a place for us, for you. He has prepared it for you. He is waiting for the day when you will see Him and when all the promises will be fulfilled.

Still, it may be difficult to keep our cool and trust our Lord when we see the world crumbling. Even as we are waiting for Jesus, that may still frighten us. There is another way of looking at it, that may help. This week I spoke with a fellow pastor.

When we last time spoke, a couple of month ago, all was well with Him. Since then, he has had strong symptoms of heart attack which wasn't a heart attack, and then scary symptoms of stroke which wasn't a stroke. Anyhow, he had full on experience.

Any certainty about the next day, any illusion of control, any sense of autonomy or independence, all of that was gone. This was not exactly the powers of the heaven shaking in a big way, but it was on a miniature scale his little world collapsing.

But then he was sharing with excitement, that this situation had brought him so close into God's embrace. That he had experience God's care and love more vividly than ever. That in the midst of this uncertainty and total lack of control and predictability, he had experienced the most overwhelming sense of peace and security.

Totally independent from his circumstances. He felt that he was in the Father's hands. Embraced, sheltered, loved and hugged, protected. The same is true about each one of God's children, the same goes for you, and some of you have been blessed with similar experiences of God's presence.

Remember, no one can snatch you out of your Father's hand, for your Father is stronger than anyone and anything. This is what Jesus reminds us. When the external safety structures are about to collapse, you are safe in God the Father's hands. The more we lose our external stability and the illusion of our control, the more we can experience His peace that surpasses all our understanding.

Our Father knows you, and He knows what you need, He knows where He wants to lead you, and He will never ever let you down. Whatever this age throws at you, whatever powers are shaken, He will only take you up to be with Him forever.

But then Jesus reminds us of another threat. A very real one. "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life ... But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Jesus and the Father will never abandon you or forsake you. That's it! But the risk is that we may abandon Him. For the distractions abound. So much of today's culture is about entertainment, about amusing ourselves into oblivion.

So much is about dissipation and drunkenness. There are so many who literary live for that, and even if such excessive lifestyle may not be common among Christians, we too are not spared from the cares of this life.

There is no difference, Christian or no Christian, there are countless problems and challenges we all need to face daily. When that happens, it may be too easy to forget who we are, and where we are heading, and to prioritize this age above everything else. When that happens, we don't see those brothers and sisters among us, they are

robbed of the blessing of God's nourishing presence. They are kept away the life-giving Word and Sacraments, their faith is starved and that day may come upon them suddenly like a trap, as Jesus warned. Please, let us watch out for one another!

Let us watch out especially for those our brothers and sisters whom you know that they are weighted down by the cares of this life. Let's remind them the Good News that our Jesus is coming back soon. That He is coming back for them.

That He has paid enormous price for us, that His affection and commitment to us is beyond our comprehension, that He doesn't want anyone to miss that great, magnificent eternal feast that is to come, and that this is the time for us rejoice, to straighten up and to raise our heads. For that day is nearer than ever.

Concluding, one more encouragement from Jesus. "Truly, I say to you ... heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." We live in this world and it may seem like something everlasting. But no!

Not only the powers of the heaven will be shaken, but the heaven itself as we know it and the earth as we know it will pass away. There is nothing in this world, in this material reality where we can find unshakable foundations. Nothing!

But there is something that will outlast everything else. The Word of God. It remains forever. By speaking God brought everything into existence. By speaking He will renew His creation. And this God has spoken to you as well.

He has chosen you before the foundation of the world, He has formed and shaped you in your mother's womb, He has looked at you and He has declared: "You are my child! You are my son! You are my daughter! You are my heir! You are mine!"

He has spoken... Heaven and earth will pass away, but His words will not pass away. This is who you are, this is what awaits you, this is what we are waiting for. So, yes, dear brothers and sisters, rejoice and straighten up for no one and nothing will be able to separate you from the Father's love in Jesus Christ!

And this promise will never pass away.

Amen.