

***Where is Christ? When will he return?***

**November 19, 2006**

**Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr**

I've always been a fan of the Sunday funnies, Prince Valiant, Hagar, Beetle *Bailey*, Blondie, but especially Peanuts. Some years ago, my wife gave me a copy of *Peanuts-A Golden Celebration* and in it there is a true classic. In the first frame, Snoopy lies draped over his doghouse roof, his face silhouetted against a bright full moon. His eyes are as big as saucers and he can't sleep, so he trots over to Charlie Brown's front door and kicks on it three times. Meanwhile Charlie Brown himself is sitting up in bed unable to sleep. So he goes to answer the door and says, *are you upset little friend? Have you been lying awake worrying? Well, don't worry, I'm here.*

Hugging Snoopy close, he consoles his best friend. *I'm here to give you reassurance, everything is all right.* Then, looking the nervous dog in the eye, he tells him, *the floodwaters will recede, the famine will end, and the sun will shine tomorrow.* Then picking Snoopy up in his arms, he goes on to tell him, *and I*

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*will always be here to take care of you!* Snoopy walks away from the encounter looking much more peaceful. Charlie Brown calls out to him one more time, *be reassured!* The final frame shows Charlie Brown back under the covers staring thoughtfully into space, unable to sleep. He says to himself, *who reassures the reassurer?* Good question.

The readings for this Sunday were chosen to emphasize the nearness of the end of the Christian year. In a larger context, they speak of the consummation, or end, of history. The Christian faith teaches that the world has a beginning and an end.

The context for Mark's apocalyptic Gospel is something like this: Mark's community is struggling not only to survive, but to make some kind of sense out of horrifying events that could potentially overwhelm their faith. Like the Hebrews addressed in the prophecy of Daniel, they are in the midst of almost

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unbearable suffering at the hands of a pagan despot. His name was Nero and this took place around 64AD, the time of the great fire of Rome.

Sisters and brothers in the faith are being burned as lamplight for Nero's parties. Christian families are being separated with many members being sold into slavery. Christians are being bagged and then fed to wild beasts before bloodthirsty crowds in the Coliseum. Others were crucified. Peter has been executed. Nero justifies this holocaust saying that Christians set the Great Fire of Rome, while a contemporary historian (Tacitus, Annals XV, 44) attributes the act of arson to Nero himself. Mark's people, as is so often the case under vicious persecution, cry out for the answer to the question: ***Where is Christ? When will he return? When is the second coming?*** To add to their anxious fears, Jerusalem, the Holy City of God, is under a terrible

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onslaught of Titus and the Roman army, a calamity to Christians and Jews alike.

This Christian community of Mark's lives between panic and pie-in-the-sky. They live between giving in to an overwhelming fear and the appealing ideas circulating among the false prophets (v. 21) meant to lead the vulnerable away from Christ. In other words, Mark is trying to keep the faithful from being falsely pessimistic without making them falsely optimistic. He wants them to endure without giving in to terror, yet not be lulled into a renunciation of their belief by fantasy redeemers and substitute messiahs. He tries to reassure the faithful that, although times are tough, Jesus is coming, only not yet. Keep the faith. The end is near, but not *that* near. Like Charley Brown with Snoopy, Mark reassures, but we wonder if he himself needed some reassuring as the reassurer. Those who preach the Gospel, as reassurers, know the feeling all too well.

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Today, the Church does not suffer under a Nero. Jerusalem, while experiencing very unsettling times, is not under a full-blown siege. What earlier generations knew as the *Cold War* has faded into history. We face no confirmed threat from any major power to our national security. Our national interests are not seriously challenged. We are instead living in an era of *discretionary wars*. Our government uses force in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and the Sudan. We have troops in the Balkans, the Horn of Africa, Korea and Okinawa, not because we must, but because we can and our government chooses to do so. There are no predicted meteor showers looming ahead. No scientists are predicting anything like a cosmic collapse on the scale of the *Big Bang* they say created the Universe. Printer's ink is devoted to the thinning of the Ozone layer and global warming because, as we learned in a film presentation a couple of weeks ago, it is a major concern.

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All of this doesn't mean there is not plenty of suffering to go around. This is hardly a peaceful period. Every year 150,000 (more or less) Christians are slaughtered for their faith. There were more Christians murdered in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century than in the previous 19 centuries combined. It goes on in Pakistan, in the African nations, most especially in the Sudan, where the Anglican Church is *still* growing in impressive numbers, and also where over the past several years more than 2 million people have died in civil strife, the majority of them Christians in the south.

Hunger and homelessness are still with us; mind bending and life-stealing drugs are most surely still with us. HIV/Aids is killing tens of thousands in Africa, and in Darfur, Chad, in the Sudan women are raped, brutalized and left with their persona obliterated, as Ann Curry of NBC news has so vividly

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reported. So, what are we to make of all this? Should we sit in *white knuckled* fear on the edge of our seats awaiting some cataclysmic occurrence? Do we quit our jobs, stop paying the mortgage, forget other important responsibilities, and simply climb up on the roof of the Parish House and wait for *The End*. Do we live in chronic fear that any minute God will wipe clean the slate of history? Or, do we just ignore the whole thing completely as some kind of ancient superstition?

What we need to remember is that the end comes on God's time, not ours. Furthermore, the *END* comes not as a termination, but as a consummation. Christ has come to save and to heal, not to destroy and annihilate. We must remember that at the end of the world, as at its beginning, there is only God, the Holy One, who desires only our sanctification. That is why we do not pray *thy judgment come* in the Lord's Prayer. We pray *thy kingdom come*. So, what about

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the end? It will come as God's act; it will come by grace. If we read a few verses beyond today's Gospel, we will see that Jesus himself warned us against too much speculation about this: ***But about that day or hour, he said, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*** (Mk. 13:22).

Meanwhile, in this life, we need to be about living our faith, sharing that faith with each other, and sharing that faith with them who know not the Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN.