

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Coach Norbert Schmidt also taught history in my high school seminary. Students admired him as a teacher and a role model. We liked his work ethic, self-confidence, faith, and commitment to educate. I did well in his classroom but not on the basketball court. A few months into my freshman year, he pulled me aside to share what he was thinking about me. He had experience on that school faculty, but he looked puzzled by something he had never before encountered. Coach was plainspoken. He said to me, “Usually my best students are also my best athletes. I don’t know what happened to you.” One of his defining techniques in the classroom was what he called the Pop Quiz. In most classes we knew we’d have a test on Friday or whatever day it would be, and the teacher gave advance notice to get ready for it. But Coach Schmidt wanted us to be ready all the time. So quite unexpectedly, on a given day, he would walk into the classroom and before setting his books on the teacher’s desk, he’d announce in a matter-of-fact voice, “Pop Quiz today, boys.” I can still hear the agonized groaning from my classmates. We did not like pulling out paper and pen to write down answers to questions we should have studied but probably did not. The Pop Quiz kept us on our toes. We learned we had to be ready every day.

The ultimate Pop Quiz awaits us when we die. We don’t know when it will happen, but we have to be ready for it every day. From Mark’s gospel today we hear some of the last verses before Jesus begins his Passion. He has entered Jerusalem for the last time. He knows the end is near. He gives final instructions to his followers. His thoughts turn to the end of the world. At Mass today these verses bring our year-long survey of Mark’s gospel to a close.

Jesus announces that he, the Son of Man, will be returning “with great power and glory.” His appearance will not come a complete surprise, but the signs are frightening to consider: “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from the sky.” Those portents will announce that “he is near, at the gates.”

Even if we do not live to behold those changes to the elements, we will face a personal darkening of the world we know and a loss of abilities like stars falling from the sky. People would like to have advance notice, but Jesus cautioned, “of that day or hour, no one knows... but only the Father.”

In our complacent present and future planning, we often overlook the suddenness with which death may overtake us. Some people have made plans: They have prepared a will, prepaid a funeral, and set priorities on lifetime goals. But others naively feel they’re not going to die yet, so why bother? As the writer William Saroyan put it, “Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case.” He died in 1981. Our day will come. Jesus, plainspoken, assured his followers, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Even after we die, Jesus’ words live. As he prepared for his own death, he prepared us for ours, lest, when it comes, we look puzzled by something we had never before encountered. His words should inspire us to be role models today, to practice a good work ethic today, to build self-confidence today, to practice faith today, and educate others today. Like bracing for a Pop Quiz, we have to be ready every day.

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