

As we approach the close of the Church's liturgical year, today's Scripture readings takes the climactic scene from the long instruction Jesus gives the disciples on the future. These texts, filled as they are with vivid imagery and symbol, pose more than ordinary difficulty to make sense of them today. How are we to avoid the pitfalls that flow from interpreting the symbolic and mythological language too literally?

The first reading appears from the Book of Daniel. Later biblical literature, especially the Book of Revelation, is cast in this mode. Such religious writing usually arises out of a situation of oppression and great turmoil for the faithful. It aims to interpret what is happening, and to give assurance. The basic message to us is "hang in there! Despite all that is happening to you—painful though it may be—the world remains in the hands of God. Evil and oppression will not win the day.

A fundamental promise is made today. Humanity will see the Son of Man coming, trailing clouds of glory. Christ is our hope of glory. His resurrection first of all, then Pentecost when God's Spirit directs the Church's mission to the world, and finally to Jesus' return at the end of time when He will establish His full Kingdom, bringing us into the fullness of life. The fundamental message is not threat but encouragement, comfort, and assurance. Jesus reveals Himself as One who is coming and as One who never ceases to be present here.

Three slender verses from Daniel 12 introduces us to Michael the Archangel who becomes "Prince" of the faithful. The text is significant because here for the first time we have a clear reference to the resurrection of the dead. This belief allows for final justice to be done. Those who have lost their lives in the cause of right, or who have simply died before the time of reckoning will not lack vindication and reward. They will be raised to everlasting life. Those who have not been faithful, and have profited from their cooperation with evil will rise to "*shame and everlasting disgrace.*"

But for the learned, Daniel goes on to single them out for special recognition, like himself, who have "*instructed many in virtue.*" They will "*shine brightly as the stars for all eternity.*"

The Gospel today gives us vivid apocalyptic imagery to portray the truth that the One who was crucified and seemingly overcome by evil, is now about to extend the triumph of His resurrection over the entire universe. Assurance and vindication emerge as vestiges of hope. Things may be overwhelming and tough now, but the future belongs to God and to the values demonstrated in the life of Jesus, as we prepare to go to meet Him. Human forces of death and exploitation have no hold on us. What we do not know is how much longer the struggle must go on. That remains wrapped in God's mystery, even for Jesus Himself.

Understood in this way, the Gospel, for all its outward strangeness, addresses the present uncertain situation of our world, and the distress we experience as a result of it. Jesus knows, and has taken into account the way we feel, because He is one of us.

