

Saint Thomas explains the Gospel for the 1st Sunday of Advent

And 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 heaven shall be moved; 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 in 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.

BEDE; The events which were to follow the fulfillment of the times of the Gentiles He explains in regular order, saying, There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars.

AMBROSE; All which signs are more clearly described in Matthew, Then shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven.

EUSEB. For at that time when the end of this perishing life shall be accomplished, and, as the Apostle says, The fashion of this world passes away, then shall succeed a new world in which instead of sensible light, Christ Himself shall shine as a sunbeam, and as the King of the new world, and so mighty and glorious will be His light, that the sun which now dazzles so brightly, and the moon and all the stars, shall be hidden by the coming of a far greater light.

CHRYS. For as in this world the moon and the stars are soon dimmed by the rising of the sun, so at the glorious appearance of Christ shall the sun become dark, and the moon not shed her ray, and the stars shall fall from heaven, stripped of their former attire, that they may put on the robe of a better light.

EUSEB. What things shall befall the world after the darkening of the orbs of light, and whence shall arise the straitening of nations, He next explains as follows, And of the earth distress of nations, by reason of the confusion of the roaring of the sea. Wherein He seems to teach, that the beginning of the universal change will be owing to the failing of the watery substance. For this being first absorbed or congealed, so that no longer is heard the roaring of the sea, nor do the waves reach the shore because of the exceeding drought, the other parts of the world, ceasing to obtain the usual vapor which came forth from the watery matter, shall undergo a revolution. Accordingly since the appearance of Christ must put down the prodigies which resist God, namely, those of Antichrist, the beginnings of wrath shall take their rise from droughts, such as that neither storm nor roaring of the sea be any more heard.

And this event shall be succeeded by the distress of the men who survive; as it follows, Men's hearts being dried up for fear, and looking after those things which shall come upon

the whole world. But the things that shall then come upon the world He proceeds to declare, adding, For the powers of heaven shall be shaken.

THEOPHYL. Or else, When the higher world shall be changed, then also the lower elements shall suffer loss; whence it follows, And on the earth distress of nations, &c. As if He said, the sea shall roar terribly, and its shores shall be shaken with the tempest, so that of the people and nations of the earth there shall be distress, that is, a universal misery, so that they shall pine away from fear and expectation of the evils which are coming upon the world.

AUG. But you will say, your punishment compels you to confess that the end is now approaching, seeing the fulfillment of that which was foretold. For it is certain there is no country, no place in our time, which is not affected or troubled. But if those evils which mankind now suffer are sure signs that our Lord is now about to come, what means that which the Apostle says, For when they shall say peace and safety. Let us see then if it be not perhaps better to understand the words of prophecy to be not so fulfilled, but rather that they will come to pass when the tribulation of the whole world shall be such that it shall belong to the Church, which shall be troubled by the whole world, not to those who shall trouble it. For they are those who shall say, Peace and safety. But now these evils which are counted the greatest and most immoderate, we see to be common to both the kingdoms of Christ and the Devil. For the good and the evil are alike afflicted with them, and among these great evils is the yet universal resort to licentious feasts. Is not this the being dried up from fear, or rather the being burnt up from lust?

THEOPHYL. But not only shall men be tossed about when the world shall be changed, but angels even shall stand amazed at the terrible revolutions of the universe. Hence it follows, And the powers of heaven shall be shaken.

GREG. For whom does He call the powers of heaven, but the angels, dominions, principalities, and powers? which at the coming of the strict Judge shall then appear visibly to our eyes, that they may strictly exact judgment of us, seeing that now our invisible Creator patiently bears with us.

EUSEB. When also the Son of God shall come in glory, and shall crush the proud empire of the son of sin, the angels of heaven attending Him, the doors of heaven which have been shut from the foundation of the world shall be opened, that the things that are on high may be witnessed.

CHRYST. Or the heavenly powers shall be shaken, although themselves know it not. For when they see the innumerable multitudes condemned, they shall not stand there without trembling.

BEDE; Thus it is said in Job, the pillars of heaven tremble and are afraid at his reproof. What then do the boards do, when the pillars tremble? what does the shrub of the desert suffer, when the cedar of Paradise is shaken?

EUSEB. Or the powers of heaven are those which preside over the sensible parts of the universe, which indeed shall then be shaken that they may attain to a better state. For they shall be discharged from the ministry with which they serve God toward the sensible bodies in their perishing condition.

AUG. But that the Lord may not seem to have foretold as extraordinary those things concerning His second coming, which were wont to happen to this world even before His first coming, and that we may not be laughed at by those who have read more and greater events than these in the history of nations, I think what has been said may be better understood to apply to the Church. For the Church is the sun, the moon, and the stars, to whom it was said, Fair as the moon, elect as the sun. And she will then not be seen for the unbounded rage of the persecutors.

AMBROSE; While many also fall away from religion, clear faith will be obscured by the cloud of unbelief, for to me that Sun of righteousness is either diminished or increased according to my faith; and as the moon in its monthly wanings, or when it is opposite the sun by the interposition of the earth, suffers eclipse, so also the holy Church when the sins of the flesh oppose the heavenly light, cannot borrow the brightness of divine light from Christ's rays. For in persecutions, the love of this world generally shuts out the light of the divine Sun; the stars also fall, that is, men who shine in glory fall when the bitterness of persecution waxes sharp and prevails. And this must be until the multitude of the Church be gathered in, for thus are the good tried and the weak made manifest.

AUG. But in the words, And upon the earth distress of nations, He would understand by nations, not those which shall be blessed in the seed of Abraham, but those which shall stand on the left hand.

AMBROSE; So severe then will be the manifold fires of our souls, that with consciences depraved through the multitude of crimes, by reason of our fear of the coming judgment, the dew of the sacred fountain will be dried upon us. But as the Lord's coming is looked for, in order that His presence may dwell in the whole circle of mankind or the world, which now dwells in each individual who has embraced Christ with his whole heart, so the powers of heaven shall at our Lord's coming obtain an increase of grace, and shall be moved by the fullness of the Divine nature more closely infusing itself. There are also heavenly powers which proclaim the glory of God, which shall be stirred by a fuller infusion of Christ, that they may see Christ.

AUG. Or the powers of heaven shall be stirred, because when the ungodly persecute, some of the most stout-hearted believers shall be troubled.

THEOPHYL. It follows, And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds. Both the believers and unbelievers shall see Him, for He Himself as well as His cross shall glisten brighter than the sun, and so shall be observed of all.

AUG. But the words, coming in the clouds, may be taken in two ways. Either coming in His Church as it were in a cloud, as He now ceases not to come. But then it shall be with great power and majesty, for far greater will His power and might appear to His saints, to whom He will give great virtue, that they may not be overcome in such a fearful persecution. Or in His body in which He sits at His Father's right hand He must rightly be supposed to come, and not only in His body, but also in a cloud, for He will come even as He went away, And a cloud received him out of their sight.

CHRYS. For God ever appears in a cloud, according to the Psalms, clouds and darkness are round about him. Therefore shall the Son of man come in the clouds as God, and the

Lord, not secretly, but in glory worthy of God. Therefore He adds, with great power and majesty.

CYRIL; Great must be understood in like manner. For His first appearance He made in our weakness and lowness, the second He shall celebrate in all His own power.

GREG. For in power and majesty will men see Him, whom in lowly stations they refused to hear, that so much the more acutely they may feel His power, as they are now the less willing to bow the necks of their hearts to His sufferings.

GREG. Having in what has gone before spoken against the reprobate, He now turns His words to the consolation of the elect; for it is added, When these things begin to be, look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption draws nigh; as if he says, When the buffetings of the world multiply, lift up your heads, that is, rejoice your hearts, for when the world closes whose friends you are not, the redemption is near which you seek. For in holy Scripture the head is often put for the mind, for as the members are ruled by the head, so are the thoughts regulated by the mind. To lift up our heads then, is to raise up our minds to the joys of the heavenly country.

EUSEB. Or else, To those that have passed through the body and bodily things, shall be present spiritual and heavenly bodies: that is, they will have no more to pass the kingdom of the world, and then to those that are worthy shall be given the promises of salvation. For having received the promises of God which we look for, we who before were crooked shall be made upright, and we shall lift up our heads who were before bent low; because the redemption which we hoped for is at hand; that namely for which the whole creation waits.

THEOPHYL. That is, perfect liberty of body and soul. For as the first coming of our Lord was for the restoration of our souls, so will the second be manifested to the restoration of our bodies.

EUSEB. He speaks these things to His disciples, not as to those who would continue in this life to the end of the world, but as if uniting in one body of believers in Christ both themselves and us and our posterity, even to the end of the world.

GREG. That the world ought to be trampled upon and despised, He proves by a wise comparison, adding, Behold the fig tree and all the trees, when they now put forth fruit, you know that summer is near. As if He says, as from the fruit of the tree the summer is perceived to be near, so from the fall of the world the kingdom of God is known to be at hand. Hereby is it manifested that the world's fall is our fruit. For hereunto it puts forth buds, that whomever it has fostered in the bud it may consume in slaughter. But well is the kingdom of God compared to summer; for then the clouds of our sorrow flee away, and the days of life brighten up under the clear light of the Eternal Sun.

AMBROSE; Matthew speaks of the fig-tree only, Luke of all the trees. But the fig-tree shadows forth two things, either the ripening of what is hard, or the luxuriance of sin; that is, either that, when the fruit bursts forth in all trees and the fruitful fig-tree abounds, (that is, when every tongue confesses God, even the Jewish people confessing Him,) we ought to hope for our Lord's coming, in which shall be gathered in as at summer the fruits of the resurrection. Or, when the man of sin shall clothe himself in his light and fickle boasting as

it were the leaves of the synagogue, we must then suppose the judgment to be drawing near. For the Lord hastens to reward faith, and to bring an end of sinning.

AUG. But when He says, When you shall see these things to come to pass, what can we understand but those things which were mentioned above. But among them we read, And then shall they see the Son of man coming. When therefore this is seen, the kingdom of God is not yet, but nigh at hand. Or must we say that we are not to understand all the things before mentioned, when He says, When you shall see these things, &c. but only some of them; this for example being excepted, And then shall they see the Son of man. But Matthew would plainly have it taken with no exception, for he says, And so you, when you see all these things, among which is the seeing the coming of the Son of man; in order that it may be understood of that coming whereby He now comes in His members as in clouds, or in the Church as in a great cloud.

TIT. BOST. Or else, He says, the kingdom of God is at hand, meaning that when these things shall be not yet shall all things come to their last end, but they shall be already tending towards it. For the very coming of our Lord itself, casting out every principality and power, is the preparation for the kingdom of God.

EUSEB. For as in this life, when winter dies away, and spring succeeds, the sun sending forth its warm rays cherishes and quickens the seeds hid in the ground, just laying aside their first form, and the young plants sprout forth, having put on different shades of green; so also the glorious coming of the Only-begotten of God, illuminating the new world with His quickening rays shall bring forth into light from more excellent bodies than before the seeds that have long been hidden in the whole world, i.e. those who sleep in the dust of the earth. And having vanquished death, He shall reign from henceforth the life of the new world.

GREG. But all the things before mentioned are confirmed with greet certainly, when He adds, Verily I say to you, &c.

BEDE; He strongly commends that which he thus foretell. And, if one may so speak, his oath is this, Amen, I say to you. Amen is by interpretation "true." Therefore the truth says, I tell you the truth, and though He spoke not thus, He could by no means lie. But by generation he means either the whole human race, or especially the Jews.

EUSEB. Or by generation He means the new generation of His holy Church, showing that the generation of the faithful would last up to that time, when it would see all things, and embrace with its eyes the fulfillment of our Savior's words.

THEOPHYL. For because He had foretold that there should be commotions, and wars and changes, both of the elements and in other things, lest any one might suspect that Christianity itself also would perish, He adds, Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away: as if He said, Though all things should be shaken, yet shall my faith fail not. Whereby He implies that He sets the Church before the whole creation. The creation shall suffer change, but the Church of the faithful and the words of the Gospel shall abide for ever.

GREG. Or else, The heaven and, earth shall pass away, &c. As if He says, All that with us seems lasting, does not abide to eternity without change, and all that with Me seems to

pass away is held fixed and immovable, for My word which passes away utters sentences which remain unchangeable, and abide for ever.

BEDE; But by the heaven which shall pass away we must understand not the ethereal or the starry heaven, but the air from which the birds are named "of heaven." But if the earth shall pass away, how does Ecclesiastes say, The earth stands for ever? Plainly then the heaven and earth in the fashion which they now have shall pass away, but in essence subsist eternally.

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