

“Here is your God. He comes with vindication.” (Homily)

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September 9, 2018 – Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Lectionary: 128; IS 35:4-7A

"Be strong, fear not!
Here is your God,
he comes with vindication;
with divine recompense
he comes to save you."

IS 35:4b

How can one doubt the everlasting relevance of holy Scripture, when one listens to today's readings in light of the present crisis of the Church? To faithful Catholics everywhere, it seems like "the world turned upside down," does it not? And indeed, the world *is* upside down when among those in whom we have placed our trust -- to lead us not into temptation, to deliver us from evil -- we have unmasked some who shamelessly do the opposite, and others who protect them, and thus enable them.

The Church has been weakened by inadequate leadership, and the Vandals are at the gates, ready to tear it down, just as they were in the fifth century, when Rome fell, and later, when Moslem hoards almost accomplished the same, and later yet, when misguided priests splintered the body of Christ in what we euphemistically call "the Reformation."

Many years ago -- almost half a century, now -- Bishop Fulton J. Sheen called attention to this pattern -- a 500-year cycle of mortal crisis in the Church -- and warned us that we were reaching the end of the fourth cycle, approaching a fourth crisis ahead. Thus, the bishop would not be surprised by today's troubles in the Church, seemingly right on schedule: another weakening from within, the flourishing of evil, and worse, its enabling.

I listened to Bishop Sheen's words the other day, musing on the terror of abused children, the pain that persists, the sadness that lasts. As I did so, I prayed for healing, a way out, a shoring up: a plan or apology or promise of the Church that would serve to right its wrongs. I prayed, and I thought, and I prayed again, but nothing seemed adequate to right those wrongs. And thus, I was not surprised, when, in the midst of my sad musings, I heard Bishop Sheen say,

"The church is not a continuing thing. It dies and rises again."

It came to me then, so clearly: *There is no way out*, no shoring up, no plan or apology or promise of human design that will serve to right the disgusting wrongs of sinful Churchmen perpetrated on innocents! Thus, history must repeat itself:

"The church is not a continuing thing. It dies and rises again."

Periodically, according to God's own design, the Church is scourged and crowned with thorns and crucified, only to rise again, purified, to newness of life. The Lord Himself predicted it in his warning to Simon Peter, a warning as fresh today as it was then:

"Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,

but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail;
and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers."

(LK 22:31-32)

Listen to the Lord. Our faith must not fail. When, in these times of trouble, we are tempted to run away in shame, as Peter did, we must turn back, and strengthen one another, and pray for renewal. It *will* come. But first, the sifting. First, the fire: only then, the rising from the ashes. *First*, our God will come with vindication and divine recompense: The abused will be vindicated, and recompense demanded of abusers and those who sheltered them. *Then*, He will raise His Church from the ashes:

"THEN will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;
THEN will the lame leap like a stag,
THEN the tongue of the mute will sing.
Streams will burst forth in the desert,
and rivers in the steppe.
The burning sands will become pools,
and the thirsty ground, springs of water."

(IS 35:5-7a)

But first, the sifting.

Thus, "Be strong! Fear not!" (IS 35:4a)

IS 35:4-7A

Thus says the LORD:
Say to those whose hearts are frightened:
Be strong, fear not!
Here is your God,
he comes with vindication;
with divine recompense
he comes to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;
then will the lame leap like a stag,
then the tongue of the mute will sing.
Streams will burst forth in the desert,
and rivers in the steppe.
The burning sands will become pools,
and the thirsty ground, springs of water.