

“Keep Watch ”

Today's Holy Gospel is a part of what is known as Jesus' Olivet Discourse that takes place just days before His arrest and crucifixion. Indeed, in it Jesus does speak of the end times – but that topic comes later, after what Jesus is speaking about in today's Gospel. Jesus is preaching to His disciples after having left the Temple, and is on the Mount of Olives – hence the term “Olivet Discourse.” He uses the term *“the abomination that causes desolation.”* This is a direct reference to the Prophet Daniel, and the reading we heard today from Daniel 12:11 *“From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days.”* So just what is this *“abomination that causes desolation?”* About 167 years before Jesus was born an absolutely terrible thing happened to the Temple and Jerusalem. There was a Seleucid Syrian king, who “Hellenistic” or influenced by the Greek Culture, named Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This evil man took over Jerusalem and explicitly desecrated the center of life for the Jews – their beloved Temple. Antiochus set up an altar to Zeus right inside the Second Temple in Jerusalem, which for the Jews was in direct violation of the second Commandment, as found in Exodus 20:4, *“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”* To make a bad thing even worse he sacrificed swine on the altar of the Temple. As many of you know it was forbidden by the Law of Moses for Jews to be even near pigs, let alone to sacrifice this unclean beast to God. Well, the problem was that this king thought he was god and could do what he wanted. (FYI - There are detailed accounts of this in 1 & 2 Maccabees, the historic books of the Apocrypha – while full of historical information are not considered to be a part of our 66 books of the Bible.) It was during this horrible time in Jerusalem that the resulting revolts by the Jews became the basis for the feast of Hanukkah, with the miracle of the oil for the lamps of the Temple lasting seven full days. This evil king, Antiochus, caused such pain and destruction in Jerusalem that people saw the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy; the *“abomination that causes desolation.”*

Jesus used this term in His Olivet Discourse to warn the disciples of another event, one which would happen in 70 AD, when the Romans would destroy Jerusalem, and of course the Temple. These words are from just before the words Jesus spoke in today's Gospel. Please turn in your Pew Bibles to page 1580, and let's look at verse 1 *“As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus, “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”* (Mark 13:1-2) Jesus, having just left the Temple for what would be His last time, prophesied that from that time forward, about forty years later, the Temple would cease to exist and Jews would be running for their lives from Jerusalem. Jesus tells His followers not to panic, that the end of days was not then but it would come later – and so He adds the prophesy to His second coming later in the Olivet Discourse. The term *“the abomination that causes desolation”* was fresh in the minds and hearts of every Jew and brought fear to their hearts that something like that could ever happen again. What Jesus said about the stones being strewn down – if you need proof - all you need to do is take a

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walk by the southern steps of the Temple, (or the Temple Mount) which are easily seen from the Mount of Olives, and nearby there are large blocks of what used to be a part of the western wall, which they found when excavating to find a street from Jesus' time that was buried amongst the rubble. The Temple and the city of Jerusalem would never be the same – they were demolished just as Jesus had said. The Jews would now need to reconstruct their lives around the Law, instead of the Temple.

Jesus adds warnings that are meant to encourage the hearers and readers – especially His followers, to stay close to the faith, and continue to share the truth, not being swayed by false prophets and false messiahs. A very important phrase that Jesus uses near the end of today's reading is found in verses 22-23 "*For false Christs (Messiahs) and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect--if that were possible.*" "*So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.*" Jesus mentions "*the elect*" – remember for a moment the words Jesus spoke in John 15:16 "*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last.*" Jesus is referring to the people whom He has called, the *elect*, and for them to continue in the faith, and not to trust the false ones who proclaim to be "a Christ" or "a messiah," which means "an anointed one" – for He has given the encouragement to trust in Him, and not anyone who claims falsely to be Him. Please also remember that the risen Jesus will add encouragement for His followers when He gives His Great Commission in Matthew 28:20 when He says "*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" The promise to never leave or forsake His followers has to be kept close to the heart, no matter what!

No matter what - means trusting in Him during days like 9/11 or the tragedy that took place in Paris on Friday Night. The sad truth is that evil prowls around like a roaring lion, trying to sweep from its path any "infidels" who believe differently than they do. I personally believe that this terrorist movement called ISIS or ISIL is straight out of hell, beheading Christians, taking down airplanes, and methodically attacking a Paris neighborhood, simultaneously having suicide bombers at 6 sites in Paris, armed with explosives and machine guns at a soccer match, a concert, and restaurants – cowardly preying on innocent victims. This is not a godly venture, it is not from a religion of peace, it is evil – pure evil that hides behind this movement – slinking into European countries as false refugees, and one day will be judged by Almighty God, but in the meantime must be dealt with. Pray for the people of Paris, whose county has not seen such devastation since the days of World War II, and whose borders are now effectively closed. Pray that the light of Christ would shine on this so called movement and reveal the true evil it is, and give countries the wisdom to carefully screen these refugees to make sure that they are not "soldiers" lying in wait to do damage in the countries that unknowingly give them refuge. At least one of these terrorists was a refugee who registered in Greece in October, and then made his way into Paris. This is also an "*abomination that causes desolation.*" Pray for the world, and especially its leaders, to see, before it is too late, the truth behind ISIS, before it does more killing and destruction.

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With all this bad news, surely there must be some good? I told you that Jesus gave the Apostles a glimpse of His second coming – in the verse immediately following today's Gospel Mark 13:26-27, on the bottom of page 1581, Jesus says "*At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.*" "*And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.*" Jesus promises that there will be a time coming when He will return, and everyone will know that it is Him, and He will gather those He has called to Himself. He also gives us more great encouragement in verse 31 - "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*" Instead of our worrying about when the end will come, we need to stay close to His words, the Word of God, and to watch and be alert.

I truly feel that the message that we can take from this 13th chapter of Mark is that when disasters happen we are to be encouraged that this is not the end. This is a great time for God's people to reach out to the victims and to show them the way to God, the truth that is only found in Jesus Christ, and the promise of salvation that comes in His name only. It is not in the name of any other god. When Moses asked the burning bush what His Name was – He responded "*I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'*" (Exodus 3:14) There is no other god that goes by that Holy Name, not Allah, not Baal, not Buddha, not Krishna. Yahweh is the Father and when He is ready He will send His Son to come and get His bride – the church. Do not accept any other false gods or those who try to stand up for them. As Jesus said in Mark 13:5 "*Watch out that no one deceives you.*" St. Paul put it this way in Ephesians 6:12 "*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*" This is uncomfortable to hear!

In closing, let me leave you with some of the words that Jesus closed this chapter of Mark's Gospel with: "*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" "*Be on guard! Be alert!*" (Mark 13:32-33) Pray!