

Matt Jacobson  
13 November 2022  
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

Year C, Proper 28, Sunday Solemn Mass  
Malachi 3:13–4:6\*; Psalm 98:5–10; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13; Luke 21:5–19

I was speaking with a friend of mine recently about whether I'll be in Rome for Vinoforum this year. Vinoforum is a week-long wine expo that takes place along the Tiber River each year in June. In addition to over 2,500 different wines, there are several top chefs preparing food. I've been a few times, though not since before the pandemic. The expo is set up kind of like a small village, a little heavenly town to walk around in, going from hut to hut.

I don't know if I'll be able to go this year, but I am hopeful. Thinking about it, imagining the future, looking forward to things like this, helps give me the endurance I sometimes need to persevere on tough days.

Vinoforum is set up near the Milvian Bridge, and it's one of two things that I associate with this bridge. The other is the Battle of the Milvian Bridge that took place in the year 312, a pivotal event leading to Constantine becoming the sole Emperor over Rome (well before there was such a thing as Vinoforum).

There are a few versions of the story, with slightly different details, but as the historian Eusebius describes it, Constantine had a vision from God, that was subsequently clarified in a dream, which led him to put the Chi-Rho symbol on his military standard (chi and rho being the first two Greek letters of Χριστός or Christ).<sup>1</sup>

And, well, then he won.

Shortly after, the imperial restrictions against Christians began to ease. The rest is history, so to speak. Christianity would soon go from being a persecuted minority to the religion of the Empire.

Eusebius concludes his *History* by essentially describing this as the culmination of God's work in the world. He writes: "when all tyranny had been purged away, the kingdom belonged...to Constantine and his sons alone...who had...cleansed the world from the hatred of God...[and] displayed their love...of God...by their manifest deeds in the sight of all men."<sup>2</sup>

Period. End of story. God and Empire together.

---

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, XXVIII-XXXI.

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, X.IX.9.

That all sounds great, I suppose, but then, about a hundred years later, Rome is sacked by Goths in the year 410. So, now what? Was the Christian God not all powerful? Was this the fault of the Empire becoming Christian and abandoning the traditional gods, as was suggested by some pagan critics?<sup>3</sup>

Well, clearly, the theology of God and Empire needed to be disentangled a bit. And, so, this is what Saint Augustine set out to do in his classic work, *The City of God*.<sup>4</sup>

In a nutshell, Augustine describes two cities: the city of God, symbolized by Jerusalem, and the earthly city, symbolized by Babylon. But, these aren't typical cities. Their borders aren't visible to us at all.

One's citizenship, so to speak, is determined by love and where that love is focused. Does one love God in a way which informs all their actions, both civic and religious. The city of God. Or is the love focused on oneself and then that is what drives things. The earthly city. Nobody can say which city an individual belongs to. There are members of the Church, at least outwardly, who in fact belong to the earthly city.

And, there are people who act honorably in civic life, pagans, who are actually citizens of the city of God, even though they don't know it yet.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Church and Empire are not synonymous. Never were—even an Empire that appeared outwardly Christian. And, so, the two cities will just have to be sorted out later. In the meantime, we need to look forward, direct our love towards God, patiently enduring until the city of God is made visible. This endurance is the message we also hear in Luke when Jesus says, “By your endurance, you will gain your lives.”

On first pass, the imagery in today's Gospel passage seems somewhat apocalyptic. Fr. Victor spoke to us a bit last week about apocalyptic writings, a genre that reveals things about the future or the heavenly realm. These texts often focus on end-of-days type themes—death, resurrection, judgment, and afterlife—things which language struggles to keep up and we often end up with very striking imagery.

This reading from Luke has this sort of a feel. “Wars and tumults.” “Earthquakes.” “Pestilences.” In fact, Luke's working off a portion in Mark that is sometimes referred to as the “Little Apocalypse.”<sup>6</sup> The Book of Revelation would be the big one.

But, if we look closely at Luke, especially at the changes he seems to be making to Mark's text, it seems like something a little different is going on.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ernest L. Fortin, “*De Civitate Dei*,” in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. by Alan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 197.

<sup>4</sup> Summarized well by Fortin in *Augustine through the Ages*, 196-202.

<sup>5</sup> Fortin, *Augustine through the Ages*, 199.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 13.

With subtle alteration to the language, Luke appears to be placing things for his readers in a chronological order. First, there are persecutions that Jesus' followers will experience. Second, the destruction of the Temple and sacking of Jerusalem. Third, which will get discussed as Luke goes on beyond what we read today, the coming of the Son of Man.<sup>7</sup>

From a close read, it seems as though the first two have already happened by the time that Luke was writing. So, really, only the return of the Son of Man is part of an end of time discourse. That is, in the portion we heard, Luke, in fact, is speaking directly to the experience of first century Christians.

He's pointing them forward, beyond the wars and the tumult, the earthquakes and the pestilences, and encouraging them to endure. He's pointing them towards Jesus because that is where their hope must lie.

We're not at the end of days yet, either, as best as I can tell, even though when I look around at the world, sometimes, things seem to be not quite right.

But, if we continue to love God, and use our love of God to inform all that we do with what we've been given; doing our part—despite the earthly city around us—staying focused on what's to come; by our endurance, Jesus tells us, we will gain our lives.

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

---

<sup>7</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 3: 324-6.