

Advent.1

A Fr. Roger Vermalen, commenting on today's readings, borrows a thought from the French Jesuit priest, Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, who was also a paleontologist. From his study of ancient bones and fossils, Teilhard came up with the idea that certain forms of life ceased to exist because they were too strong to adapt to changing circumstances. Dinosaurs would be an example of such forms of life. They disappeared because they were too strong to adapt to changes in their environment. Cockroaches, on the other hand, were around long before dinosaurs made their appearance, and they are still around millions of years after the dinosaurs have become extinct. Why? Because, according to Teilhard, they were weak enough to be able to change and therefore survived. The weaker the creature, the more adaptable it is, and the better its chances of surviving.

Fr. Vermalen now applies Teilhard's principle to the Christians of the first century. The earliest Christians, those who lived in the thirties, forties, fifties of this first century, had expected that the risen Jesus would return very soon to put an end to the world as we know it and to usher in the Kingdom of God in all its fullness. We see this belief in the earlier documents of the New Testament; e.g.,

in the Letters of St. Paul, especially in his earliest letter, his First Letter to the Thessalonians, written in the early fifties, so less than twenty years after the Lord's crucifixion and death. Our second reading today is from this letter. Here Paul urges his fellow Christians to increase in love for one another because the Lord is coming. Both he and they would have understood this coming to be in the immediate future. Indeed, they were worried about those who had died before the Lord's return. What would happen to them when the Lord returned? Would they miss out on it? No, Paul assures them. They will be raised and will join those still living to be taken up to heaven with the risen Lord.

But by the time the seventies came and the Lord had not returned, Christians had to do one of two things: either keep insisting on their belief in an immediate return of the Lord or change it. If they did the first, they would have been like the dinosaurs. Unable to adapt to the facts, they would eventually have disappeared. But they didn't do that. They changed, they adapted. They chose to be like the cockroaches rather than the dinosaurs. They did not change their belief entirely but they adapted it to the circumstances. Jesus will return, they now said, but not immediately. And now they could see that the Lord himself, during his earthly life, had said that no one knew, not even he, when the end would come. So they

felt comfortable. They still believed Jesus would come, but they now saw it as something whose timing was known to God alone.

But now a new problem arose. When we are waiting for something to happen but know that it will probably not happen right away, we can grow slack. We have time, we say to ourselves. Manana will be soon enough to do this or that. We see this problem in Luke's Gospel which was written in the seventies or eighties and which no longer thinks that the Lord's return is around the corner. It could be, but no one knows for sure. Therefore, we have to be ready whenever it happens. So Luke writes: "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap."

Since Darwin and his discovery of the evolution of species our understanding of our world and time has changed drastically. We no longer think in thousands of years but in millions, even billions, of years. Have you heard that commercial featuring Ted Burns, the author of those TV series on the Civil War and the National Parks? Looking down from the rim of the Grand Canyon, he tells us, we are looking at rocks carved by the Colorado River over seven

billions years ago. Yet it still matters to us whose hand we are holding.

God is greater than we thought. Our history and that of our world is more mysterious and more marvelous than we could have imagined. And, most marvelous of all, it is all going somewhere, a somewhere which Teilhard described as the breaking through of human consciousness into the consciousness of the risen Christ who is, according to Teilhard, the Omega Point of world history, the point where everything comes together in unity. The Scriptures call it the Second Coming of the Lord.

And now, at the beginning of this Advent season, we repeat to ourselves once again, both personally in our individual lives and as the church, what Luke wrote to his readers: “Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth. Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.”