

I still have difficulty watching the Twin Towers go down in the plume of dust. Once in a while, a T.V. station will show the footage. I think about all the people who were trapped in the buildings, regular office workers, janitors, building maintenance workers, visitors, firefighters, and police... These were the people who were engaged in the daily tasks. They were just starting their day, as they have in the past. They rode subways, they bought their coffees and the newspapers, they said hello to their co-workers, and sat down at their desks. Then it all turned into the vortex of terror and death.

September 11 was probably *the* event that drove many Americans to fear and anger. The surviving families still suffer in their hearts, and they will carry the wounds for a long time. Even the people who were far removed from the ground zero were profoundly affected. I remember, one firefighter deeply concerned about the welfare of himself and his family, in case a dirty bomb went off in the Bay Area. He

knew he would have a very slim chance of survival. He was tormented between the almost certain fate and his sense of duty to the people and his love for the wife and daughters. He opened up to me, and tearfully shared it with me.

In the time of Jesus, things were not all that great. One might say it was time of fear and anger as well. Wars have not faded from the memory of the people; the political situation was beginning to unravel; the occupation army ruled the land; rumors of revolt against the occupation army circulated; the Roman prefect only cared the economy was stable enough to send the tributes back to Rome on time; the nation's leaders served at the pleasure of the Romans; the religious leaders were unconcerned about the suffering mass; and the rumors of impending doomsday was everywhere. And this warning of impending doom also came from the mouth of Jesus. It is known as "little apocalypse" among the scholars. The Gospels

contain the snippets of warning about the great distress in the heaven and the earth. Jesus stated with certainty:

"Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Well, the truth is that that was a long, long time ago, and heaven and earth are still standing as they have in the past. The only thing that is not certain is whether the words of Jesus have, or not have, passed away.

Many have discounted the saying, brushing it off as something that will never happen. Others took it literally, and still believe that such a day will come. And whenever a disaster struck, whenever there was a war, it only added more certainty to the prediction of doomsday. And we know that the predicted doomsday has passed many times without incident in the past. What people overlook in the repetition of the failed prediction of the doomsday is the suffering

that people endure. It did not have to be the actual second coming of the Son of Man. It did not have to be the shaking of the foundation of the world. There were many disasters, wars, and famines. To those who have suffered them, they could not tell the difference, as far as pain and suffering were concerned, whether it was just a regular disaster, or whether it was a genuine apocalyptic time, when all things were supposed to come undone.

Today, we face great challenges as a nation. There is the fear, whether this economy will rebound in time. There is the fear, if the housing market will recover. There is the fear, if average Joe will lose his job and his house—and many have. Many businesses have gone bankrupt. The investment and retirement evaporated altogether. Students are worried, if they would be able to pursue their careers, once they get out of the school, that is, *if* they could afford to go to school. Then again, our country is still one of

the best in the world to live in, if not the best.

Compared to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, we are doing extremely well. I cannot imagine how we would manage to go on, if we had to fear the random attacks as they do. For those people who live in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, it would feel as though the powers of heaven have been shaken. They witness daily the unmistakable signs that there is great distress in their land. They would fear, no doubt, the uncertainty and turmoil that will come upon their world for the good many years in the foreseeable future.

For the people of today, what Jesus said long time ago could have relevant meanings. It is not just a tale of the old time. It could describe the distress that affects many lives and many nations today. The timing and context may not fit, but the distress part, the suffering part that any human must endure,

rings true to those who are suffering today.

To some, the day has sprung upon them like a trap. They were just doing their jobs, and all of a sudden the whole building collapsed. They were just working hard and saving for their dream houses, and all of a sudden, the whole economy tanked, business failed, and the unemployment rate shot up all time high. They missed the mortgage payments, and their factories closed. They were just doing the routine things, going about their businesses, and all of a sudden, the whole place was turned upside down by a suicide bomber.

All they were trying to do was to live their lives and fulfill their dreams. And to some of us, pain and suffering seem never to end, and they continue to struggle every moment of their lives. To them, the distress has already happened. They have been living it everyday.

What Jesus said was not just limited to the Hebrew people

living in the occupied land.
Jesus meant it for all humanity.
Everyone is susceptible to this
great distress, according to Jesus.
It could happen here and
everywhere:

For it will come upon all who live
on the face of the whole earth.

People tend to see only what they
want to see. But there are things
unseen, besides what is seen.
Things that we touch and own
are tangible things. Many people
put their trust in the tangible
things. These things that we can
touch and own, they believe, will
keep them safe in times of
disasters. And it is true to a
certain degree. The rich have a
better chance of enduring the
hard time than the poor.

But there are times that no
tangible things can save any one
from any disaster. No
investments, no portfolio could
save people from losing their
jobs and houses. Nothing could
save those who were trapped in
the Twin Towers. Nothing can

protect you from the determined
suicide bombers.

Spiritual people do recognize
this limitation of the tangible
things. They recognize that life
is, fundamentally speaking,
fragile. They also recognize that
there are unseen things that affect
the life greatly—things that we
cannot touch or see. They realize
that there is more to what is
seen—there is a whole another
world beyond the tangible,
beyond the limitation of what our
eyes can see and what our hands
can touch.

Their allegiance is not to what
can be seen and touched, what
can be destroyed, and what can
be sold and bought. Their
allegiance is to something that is
permanent, yet unseen. Their
allegiance is to something that
cannot be destroyed or harmed.
Their allegiance is to something
that is not made with hands.
Their lives are grounded on
something that no one can take
away from them. Yet they are
compassionate to things that are
not permanent.

It is simple to test whether you have this or not. You can imagine what it would be like, if everything that you hold dear to your life has been taken away one by one.

There was a church member who divorced his wife of 14 years. He lost his house and the custody of the children to his ex. The only thing he had, he confessed, was his car and his job. One day, however, he found out that he had nothing. His job and his car meant nothing to him. He realized that he had lost something that defined him, something that sustained him, something that energized him, something that made him laugh, something that made him dream, something that gave him the reason to get up in the morning. There was absolutely no joy in his life. He spat out these words: "Suddenly, I had nothing."

He vowed to me that he would never let that happen to him again. He was determined to keep what he had, now he had the house full of kids and loving

wife. He took the custody of the girls, when his ex-wife remarried. The divorce taught the man what really was the center of his life. The whole pain and suffering opened his eyes to see what was unseen to him in the past.

What is it that we would hold dear to our lives? What would be left, when all tangible things are gone? If you knew for sure what that would be, then you are already on guard, as Jesus said. Your hearts would not be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness, and worries of this life. And even if that day caught up with you unexpectedly, you would know you've had the full life, lacking in nothing. You would know that you've had everything.

When the day comes, however, you would have strength to escape all these things that will take place. You will not faint with fear. This Advent, may you receive that gift of the discernment to see what is unseen.