

Peter M. Antoci
C27
Hagai 1:15-2:9, Ps 145
II Thess 2:1-5, Luke 20:27-38

The Grace Right In Front of You

Psalm 145 says: The Lord is near to those who call upon him (Psalm 145:19)

These words remind us of the steadfast presence – the NEARNESS – of something we seem to constantly miss: the NEARNESS of grace in our lives.

We are always seeking an EDGE, a PEEK around the next corner, a PREVIEW of what is coming. The lengths we will go to, to look around that edge, can get us into some pretty humorous, odd, or dangerous situations. Doesn't matter how young or old you are, how mature or smart. We want to know what's coming up, what's near.

As we come to the end of the year, the Church's cycle of scriptures veer into more and more EDGY language – it's called *apocalyptic*. But the common use of that word just won't help us. When WE say 'apocalyptic' we usually mean 'catastrophic.' Well, that is only the most superficial way to interpret these scriptures. Some also think they are a form of Biblical fortune telling. But the term 'apocalypse' just means REVELATION, as in something becoming known, made manifest, something SEEN. So then, whenever the Bible brings us apocalyptic language, it is trying to reveal something about God, about GRACE being made known in our lives. If that comes alongside difficult, troublesome, or traumatic events – well, isn't that often TRUE? Isn't it often the case that we don't, or won't, see the grace that is right in front of us, until it is revealed by the COLLAPSE of our usual way of seeing?! The way things usually are, the way things ALWAYS seem, often prevents us from seeing God standing right next to us.

THAT is what is so disturbing about apocalyptic language: it confronts us with the idolatry of the USUAL, of the HABITUAL, of anything we promote to the status of 'ALWAYS' as in "That's the way things ALWAYS are." Those 'always' type of things are the idols that Paul reminds the Thessalonians about. And he tells them that until those *always-idols* are revealed, and seen to be CORRUPT, BANKRUPT, DECEPTIVE, and EVIL, we will be held in their thrall. Until those idols of how things seem are unmasked as the distraction that they are – we will not see that grace that is near us, that is just around the corner.

The proximity of renewal, restoration, and consolation, is precisely what the prophet Haggai tried to reveal to the people of Judah. Everything around them spoke of corruption and destruction. Everything they KNEW was squalor, injustice, and worry. What they KNEW to be true was insecurity and want, that neither the government, nor the church, nor their neighbors could change. But in the face of all that, Haggai says: TAKE COURAGE! God is closer than you think. Take courage, your deliverance is nearer than you can see. Take courage, these worries are distracting you from the grace that is right next to you. *Apocalypse* is not fortune telling. It is opening one's eyes.

Nothing puts this contrast between the idols we see and the grace that is near, better than today's Gospel passage. Here we have a public relations TRAP that masquerades as a theological debate. The Sadducees – effectively the 1st Century oligarchs – want to embarrass this upstart teacher Jesus. They know he belongs to a party that believes in the resurrection, which they do not believe in. But they DO believe very much in law and order. The law says that out of compassion a man must take his brother's widow into his house and give her shelter, and children. That is to say, he must protect her present and ensure her future. But whose WIFE would she be in this resurrection *you* believe in, Jesus? What happens to law and order in heaven, teacher? Now seriously, they could care less about the answer. Remember this is a trap.

Jesus, however, takes them more seriously than they take themselves. He reveals their own evil intentions. He unmask the IDOL they have made of God's law. You see, behind their cynical abuse of the Torah, the Sadducees' question belies a profound human apprehension, and it is THIS: Does COMPASSION have limits? Is there a point when we are 'off the hook,' so to speak, in caring for that widow? Jesus makes the contrast quite strongly by discussing 'this age' and "that age." Yes, clearly, things DO get in the way of compassion in our age. We DO need guidelines to help with that. But at ANY given moment our needs, our worries, and our responsibilities may become the IDOLS that mask the GRACE, which is nearer than we think. And when these idols fail us, and they WILL fail us, we are left in the wake of their ruins. We NEED our own apocalypse. We need a REVELATION. We need an EDGE to survive what is coming. What we really need to know is that in THAT AGE compassion is not a zero-sum game. It is not limited by our responsibilities, or our fallacies, or even our energy. In THAT AGE, grace will be the FIRST thing we see. It will not be hidden behind any idols we presently grasp at.

As we near the end of the year, the Church asks us to reflect on this question: What keeps YOU from seeing the grace that is right in front of you?