

THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS

The Second Reading for today came from 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8, 13-17. The first three verses say: *1 We ask you, fellow-Christians, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together with Him, 2 that you should not be quickly shaken out of your minds or be alarmed, either through a person possessed by a spirit, or through a statement, or through a letter that supposedly comes from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Let no one deceive you in any way! For that day will not come unless the revolt has first occurred, and unless the "man of lawlessness," who is going to be destroyed, has been revealed.*

When people think about the end of the world, it often seems they are ready to believe any rumour that comes along. This happens especially when people have not carefully studied what God says about that day. It seems that some of the Thessalonians were no different. A false notion about the end of the world was circulating in their congregation. The result was that some of the Thessalonians (we don't know how many) were becoming "unsettled or alarmed."

What was this false idea that was circulating? Paul does not say much about it, except to mention the rumour "that the day of the Lord has already come." The "day of the Lord" could mean the end times. This involves various signs and events that would culminate in Christ's visible return, the destruction of the universe, and the final judgment. In this understanding of "the day of the Lord," the rumour would have implied that the final signs of the end of the world were taking place and Christ's coming was imminent.

Other commentators, consider "day of the Lord" to be the Last Day, when Christ comes visibly to judge the world. In 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4 this is the clear meaning of this expression. Moreover, in the context before us, Paul indicates the subject he is going to address is "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together with Him." Understanding "the day of the Lord" in this manner, the rumour would imply that Christ had already come. Whatever the exact content of the rumour, its effect on the Thessalonians was clear. Paul had to address himself to it lest its unsettling effect on God's people continue and perhaps spread.

What gave this rumour some status was the added rumour that Paul himself had said the day of the Lord had already come. In his first letter Paul had indeed spent quite a bit of time instructing them about Jesus' "coming" and their "being gathered to Him." But Paul categorically denies he had ever said that "the day of the Lord has already come." Though this statement was "supposed to have come" from him, Paul denies ever having spoken such a thing in "some statement or letter." Anyone who told them Paul was the source of the rumour was deceiving them. Paul urges them not to listen to such deception any longer.

What he says next is, at least at first, quite surprising to us. It was not so surprising to the Thessalonians, because while Paul was with them, he had told them about this more than once. Instead of simply denying the false rumour, Paul launches into a lengthy prophecy about two events that would have to take place before the day of the Lord would come. Since these two things still lay in the future, so did the day of the Lord.

The one thing that would happen is a revolt. But the following verses, especially verses 10 to 12, indicate that Paul is talking about a denial or desertion from the truth of salvation. In the Old Testament this word referred to unfaithfulness to God or the denial of God. In the only other place where it is used in the New Testament, Acts 1:21, it also refers to a turning away or desertion.

The second event that must take place is the revelation of a "man of lawlessness." He would be particularly responsible for the apostasy, or falling away, because he would be a powerful and influential leader who would presume to take the place of Christ. Thus he is often referred to as the Antichrist. Since he tries to take the place of Christ and leads people away from Christ, his fate is sealed. He is "going to be destroyed."

Numerous misinterpretations and speculations have arisen from this prophecy. Many people contend that we cannot know for sure what the fulfilment of this prophecy is. Yet if we take everything that Paul says neither leaving any of it out nor ignoring or altering the meaning of words, the fulfilment does become clear. This prophecy is fulfilled in the line of men who have served and will serve in the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church.