

40

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

30 October 1977

Wisdom 11:23-12:2

2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2

Luke 19:1-10

Besides reading the Bible, which is the word of God, a Christian who is faithful to that word must also read the signs of the times, current events, in order to illumine them with that word. I am going to point out a few signs, and then I have asked Bishop Rivera to give the biblical interpretation, the homily properly speaking.

The signs of the times

First of all, I would like us to analyze and view in the light of faith this scene of two bishops celebrating the Eucharist. We are the successors of the apostles, and through the ages we bishops have brought God's revelation to the people and to history. We are the authorized teachers who have been charged with guarding and transmitting the deposit of faith. At the same time, we make present in people's lives the redemption of Jesus Christ.

Since our beloved brother, Bishop Arturo Rivera Damas, has been appointed the ordinary of Santiago de María, let us view with faith this successor of the apostles who will guide that portion of the church. Since he has served as bishop here in the archdiocese for seventeen years, it is only right that we should express to him our sentiments of gratitude, admiration, and solidarity. Moreover, the whole community accompanies him in this vision of faith, the same as in Paul's time. For in those days, when one of the apostles was leaving one community to go to another, he bore with him the support of the sending community, which continued to pray for him and accompany him. In the same way, I feel that all of us will accompany Bishop Rivera in his new ministry. Indeed last Wednesday the whole archdiocese gave him a wonderful display of affection, and there was also homage given by all the priests in Domus Mariae. And today this Mass of the archdiocese seeks to render loving homage to him and to express our solidarity. We want to tell him that he is not going off alone; traveling with him are all his sisters and brothers, bishops, priests, religious, and faithful. Proclaiming the word for a world that does not want to hear it is hard, difficult work; he will be misunderstood. As a sign, then, of our communion with him, we are celebrating this Eucharist together today.

This week, which someone called a «tragic week», has brought us other signs of our times. The cathedral where we now gather was the scene of bloodshed. José Roberto Valdez, suffering from bullet wounds, came here to die. Here we kept a wake

for him, and here also, sisters and brothers, I personally celebrated the funeral Mass before his burial. From that moment I announced what is now happening: people are criticizing me for wanting to express solidarity with suffering; they claim that I have acted politically. I am not concerned about politics. What concerns me is that a pastor must be present wherever there is suffering. Just as I have gone to many other places where there is suffering and death, so I came here to bring words of consolation to those who were suffering and to express my condolences to the sorrowing family. I did the same for the family of the woman vendor who was killed in that bloody crime, and I am sending my condolences also to the families of the police officers who were killed. For the church there are no distinct categories; there is only suffering. We must sympathize with pain wherever it is found. That is why I was present at the time of the death of the foreign minister Borgonovo; that is why I was present during the suffering of the *campesinos*.

I believe that the voice of the church must be a word of condolence in the midst of suffering. The church's voice must also be a word that repudiates crime and violence. When are we going to end this wave of bloodshed and torment in our country?

During Roberto's funeral I also wanted my words to be words of support for the just demands of our people. The just demands, I said. What sin is there when a poor worker harvesting coffee or sugarcane or cotton is hungry and asks for some soup, an egg, a little food to replenish the energy he has spent so that he can continue to harvest these crops which bring happiness to the nation and should be seen as the work of God for the benefit of all? I was delighted, after ending the homily, when a woman approached me and said, «I am a small coffee grower, and I come here to tell you that I have always listened to you and I am in agreement with these demands. We all have to participate in the happiness of the country». I thanked her and said, «Your words encourage me and give me hope that they find an echo in the hearts of Salvadorans».

At the same time, I was saddened by a telegram I received from a cane farmer. It stated, «The archbishop knows nothing about costs. That is why he is making claims for the workers». I have made it clear that I do not speak as an expert. I do not know how much money is spent or how much should be paid in wages. But I do know that God gives the fruits of the earth for everyone. As pastor and in the name of God who creates all things, I say to those who have wealth and to those who labor and to government officials: Be just! Hear the cries of the people! Violence and bloodshed will not resolve any of these economic, social, or political situations! We must deepen our knowledge of these matters so that there are no more tragic weeks and no more sorrows. It is necessary for us all to listen! The people have already waited too long. I believe that it is only just that this situation be studied in depth by experts, without squandering government funds or sending the products of our land to other destinations. God has created these goods for the welfare of the whole community. Let us act with justice and respect for private property and all the other things that the church also defends. But let it be always according to what Saint Paul says about rescuing creation from the oppression of sin, the creation that is groaning and awaiting the liberation of the children of God (Rom 8:20-21).

In this context I thank and congratulate a teacher who sent me a letter with a check for 1,407 colones. She wrote, «This represents three months of my retirement

pension. I gladly give this money to help all those needy people who are in debt because of the present situation». In the diocesan offices there is a fund to help people in need, and it continues to grow through these donations that are really assistance for our sisters and brothers. This money does so much good! May God bless this teacher for her Christian attitude.

Finally, as I said before the body of José Roberto, the church cannot fail to speak here a word of hope, a word of transcendence. In the struggle to claim rights here on earth we must not forget that there is a God who judges, and there is a death that places us beyond history. There is a heaven, and there is a hell. There is God's justice, what is called the eschatological vision of the church. In these hours of tragedy, bloodshed, and suffering I want to sow this vision of hope and transcendence, not as opium for the people (as communists say when criticizing the church), but as encouragement so that we will act more justly on this earth. We know that there is a Judge who will hold us all accountable. With this hope I want to fill the hearts of all those who have been the victims of violence during these days.

And this is my third vision of reality: one victim of violence expressing his solidarity with this week of tragedy. Don Luis Chiurato came to me in tears. His whole family, as you know, is weeping because of the mysterious disappearance of this spouse and this mother. Don Luis told me, «I am almost certain that she is already dead. I give you this offering and ask you to celebrate Mass for her and for those who died this week and for all the other victims of this unending tragedy». How I thank you, Don Luis, and you know how deeply I feel the anguish of your family because of the mysterious disappearance of your wife.¹ Joining with you are many other families who weep for those who have disappeared without reappearing. Let us lift up our prayers for all those whose fate—whether they are dead or alive—we do not know and for those who we know with certainty have died by violence. That is the prayer of the archdiocese this morning, a votive offering to the Lord so that he will bring comfort and hope to so many families in anguish and so that he will also grant eternal rest to those who have already crossed the threshold of life.

Finally, sisters and brothers, I have other news about the life of our church, such as the twenty-fifth anniversary of the priesthood of some of our brothers. I also congratulate the community of Lourdes for their confirmation ceremony; the young people there were well prepared to receive this important sacrament of confirmation. I also want to express thanks for the many best wishes that arrived on the occasion of our naming Monsignor Urioste to succeed Bishop Rivera as vicar general.

This week we celebrate two days filled with great hope: Tuesday the first and Wednesday the second, the feasts of All Saints and All Souls. Christians view this earth from the perspective of a life beyond. Death does not end in those graves on which we heap flowers. We put our flowers there because they are bedrooms awaiting the resurrection. On All Saints Day we are aware of so many saints who have not been elevated to the honor of the altars: our relatives, our friends, our companions. Let us unite ourselves to that army of the blessed and to that whole penumbra of death so that

¹ Thirty days after the kidnapping of Mrs Elena Lima de Chiurato, no political-military organization or group had yet claimed responsibility. *El Diario de Hoy* (4 October 1977).

we may realize that the pilgrim life of the Christian does not come to an end and that there is a God awaiting us with open arms. In this way true meaning is given to this life even if we do not understand all its greatness while we are alive. Now that we have heard these signs of the times, our beloved brother, Bishop Rivera, will interpret them in the light of the Gospel.

Interpretation of the signs of the times in the light of God's Word

Sisters and brothers, my first word can be no other than a cordial thank-you to the archbishop for this very meaningful gesture of wanting me to concelebrate at this time when I am practically leaving the Archdiocese of San Salvador to take up the new charge the supreme pontiff has entrusted to me. He has explained the meaning of this concelebration. I want only to stress something he has also said: that those of us who have worked together should pray together because such prayer assures us that we will continue working together, united in collegial affection, in solidarity, and in the real desire for our people to grow in faith, to live with hope, and to translate love into concrete deeds.

The archbishop has mentioned once again the events we have experienced in recent days. He has always done this because it makes it easier for us to understand how God's word should enlighten our lives, and not only our personal lives but also our life as a group, our collective life, our national and international life. That word is light for the mind, energy for the will, warmth and feeling for our hearts; it is a sword that penetrates to the depths, cutting attachments and freeing our spirit.

And I believe God's word helps us to judge the events we have experienced. Today's first reading from the book of Wisdom shows God to be above everything. It is interesting to stress this because this book was written in Greek by a Jew who resided in Egypt but who lived his Jewish faith deeply. In that land he stated that all creation is like a grain of sand in the scales in comparison with God; the whole world, compared with God, is like a drop of dew that falls in the morning and then vanishes, evanesces, evaporates (Wis 11:22). And it is interesting that he says all this in that land, a place where things were worshiped and humans enslaved. It was there that thanks to slave labor the great pyramids were built which are still admired by people today. But how many slaves died in those labors, during an age when they used only the inclined plane and levers to move the massive carved stones that formed the graceful pyramids of Egypt? The biblical author speaks to the Egyptian people in this way, almost as if to remind us today that we should not divinize humans or divinize wealth or power or pleasure.

The book of Wisdom not only tells us this but speaks of God almost as if we were reading the Gospel. It tells us that this God is merciful, that he takes pity on each and every person, that he closes his eyes to people's sins so that they will repent (Wis 11:23). In speaking to us of God's mercy, it stresses two aspects: one is that God always has mercy, and the other is that he has the power to remove whatever is causing suffering. Certainly it is difficult for us to conceive how God, being a spirit, can feel pain and suffering. Well, to remove any doubt about this, God becomes man; he becomes like us in all things but sin. And now not only is he merciful, but he makes this mercy felt because he shares our suffering. And sharing our suffering does not mean having pity on

us; it means suffering along with us, *compati* in Latin. That is why Jesus could say he had compassion on the people, and that is why he was deeply moved by physical pain, by the blind, the deaf, the paralyzed, and the lepers. He felt compassion for those grieving the death of their loved ones because, as the first reading from the book of Wisdom says, the Lord is a «lover of life» (Wis 11:26). So Jesus, the lover of life, gives us life in abundance (John 10:10), and he raises people from the dead—the Gospel recounts many cases of resurrection. But Jesus seeks to go deeper into the causes of evil to reach sin: he forgives sins and feels compassion for sinners. Thus we have those beautiful parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Drachma, the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:1-32). That is why he forgives and is concerned for those who have strayed from God, such as the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). But he is especially concerned about those who have made earthly goods their gods. Today's gospel shows us our Lord Jesus Christ's concern for those who worship money as they bow before the golden calf and for those who, relying on wealth, are not afraid to oppress, exploit, and maltreat those who serve them.

In the gospel we hear how our Lord is walking through the streets of Jericho. In the city there is a rich man, the chief tax collector, who has an earnest desire to see Jesus. Since he is short in stature, he climbs a tree, never imagining that our Lord, cheered by the crowds, would notice him. But as he passes under the tree, he lifts his eyes, sees him, and calls him by name: «Zacchaeus, come down for I want to go to your house. I want to stay at your house» (Luke 19:5). When Zacchaeus hears that voice, he comes down. But it is not mere curiosity that motivates him. On hearing the malicious comments of those who see Jesus enter his house, Zacchaeus shows himself to be a man who for some time has felt the weight of sin on his conscience. Before Jesus he declares: «I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount». Our Lord congratulates him for that: «Zacchaeus, today happiness has come to your house» (Luke 19:8-9). This aspect of the gospel is very interesting because it helps us to see that true conversion expresses itself in deeds. It is not enough just to say that one repents of a sin; it is also necessary to repair the harm that was done. Since that collector of taxes and chief publican had often extorted money in carrying out his job, he felt the need to give half of his goods to the poor and to reimburse fourfold those he had defrauded.

Sisters and brothers, the Gospel calls us to such a conversion, a conversion that doesn't just remain in sentiments but that leads to total change and teaches us the need to share. The archbishop told us that the world's goods are created by God for the benefit of all and therefore must correspond to this plan of God.

We declare that God our Lord does not forget us. God is concerned for us and speaks to us through creation, through his word, but above all through his Son Jesus. And today God speaks to us through the church and through its members: through the bishops, through the priests who collaborate with the bishops, and through the faithful who share in the prophetic, priestly, and royal mission of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us welcome this word and take care that it is not something that is kept in a broken sack; let it not be scattered along the wayside or fall among thorns or onto stones. Rather, let it fall on good ground so that it can take root and give thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold (Mark 4:1-8).

I end by again thanking the archbishop for this gesture of wanting me to concelebrate with him. I assure him on this occasion that I want this gesture to be a symbol of the solidarity with which we will work together in the future, he in this archdiocese, and this brother of his in the diocese of Santiago de María.