

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

**Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time
October 30, 1977**

Wisdom 11:23-12:2

2 Thesolonians 1:11-2:2

Luke 19 1-10

In addition to reading the Bible, which is the Word of God, a Christian, who is faithful to this Word, must also read the signs of the times and enlighten them with the Word. I am going to point out a few of the events and these signs of the time and then Bishop Rivera will give a Biblical interpretation --- that which we might properly call the homily.

Signs of the times

In the first place, 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 throughout the ages we have brought God's revelation to people and their history. Bishops are the authorized teachers who have been charged with guarding and transmitting the deposit of faith. At the same time, bishops have the obligation to make the redeeming life of Jesus Christ become present in history.

Since our beloved brother, Bishop Rivera Damas, has been appointed the ordinary of the Diocese of Santiago de María, we, through the eyes of faith, see him as the successor of the Apostles, one who is going to lead the Church in this area. He has served here in the Archdiocese for seventeen years and therefore it is only right that we should express to him our gratitude, admiration and solidarity. At the same time, with this vision of faith, and as Saint Paul said, when one of the Apostles leaves a community to minister to another people, he carries in his heart the people of that former community who continued to pray for him and accompany him. Thus, we feel that the whole Archdiocese will accompany Bishop Rivera in his new ministry. We expressed our deep love for him on Wednesday, when all the priests gathered at *Domus Mariae* to give him homage. Now, at this Archdiocesan Mass, we have another opportunity to express to him our solidarity and to assure him that all his sisters and brothers, bishops, priests, men and women religious and laity will accompany him and minister with him in this difficult work that is often misunderstood --- this ministry of proclaiming the Word to a world that does not want to listen. This morning, as a sign of this unity, we celebrate the Mass together.

Another sign of the times is seen in the fact that someone has called this week a very tragic week. The cathedral, where we now gather, was the scene of bloodshed. José Roberto Valdez died here, mortally wounded from gunshots. His body was viewed here and before his burial I celebrated the funeral Mass for him. From the time that I announced what had happened, I have been criticized for expressing my solidarity with Roberto. People have said that this was a political act. I am not concerned about politics. As pastor, I am concerned about being present with those who suffer. In the same way that I have traveled to all those places where there is suffering and death, I came here to bring words of comfort and consolation to those who were suffering and to express my condolences to the members his

family who were in mourning. I did the same for the family of the other person who was selling goods on the street and was killed during this same incident. For the Church there are no distinct categories. There is only suffering. As I was present at the time of the death of Mr. Borgonovo, the Chancellor, so also I was there at the time of the death of the *campesinos*. I believe that I am the voice of the Church in these situations, a voice that expresses condolences in the midst of pain and suffering.

At the same time, I want my word to also be one that repudiates this 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 word to be one of support to the just demands of our people. I said our demands are just. What sin is there when one who as a worker harvesting coffee or sugarcane or cotton is hungry and asks for some soup, an egg, a little food to replenish his energy and enable him to continue to harvest these products? This is certainly a work that ought to bring happiness to the nation, a work that should be seen as the work of God. As I concluded my homily, I was pleased when a woman approached me and said: *I am a 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 this process of bringing happiness to our country.* I thanked her and said: *Your words encourage me and give me hope that this word will find an echo in the hearts of all the people of El Salvador.*

At the same time, I was saddened by the telegram that I received from a individual who plants sugarcane: *The archbishop does not understand the great amount of money that is invested in this crop. Therefore, he takes the side of the workers.* I have stated several times that I do not speak as an expert and I do not know how much money is invested nor do I know how much money should to be paid to the workers. But I do know that God gives the fruit of the land to everyone. As pastor and in the name of God who creates all things, I say to those who have and to those who harvest and to government officials: Be just! Listen to 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! Let this not be another tragic and sorrowful week! It is necessary that we all listen! The people have waited for too long. I believe that it is just that this situation should be studied in depth with experts and not squandering government funds nor sending the products of our land to other destinations. God has created these goods for the better welfare of the whole community. Therefore, the Church cries out for justice and for respect of private property. Like Saint Paul, we raise our voice so that creation might be saved from the oppression of sin, for creation is groaning in labor pains and awaits the liberation of the children of God (a).

In this context, I thank and congratulate a professor who sent me a letter with a check for 1,407 colones. He said: *This represents three months of my retirement pension and I gladly give this money to help those in need and those who are in debt because of the present situation.* In the diocesan offices there is a fund that is used to help people in need and continues to grow through these donations that allow us to help our sisters and brothers. This money is put to good use. May God bless this teacher for his Christian attitude.

As I stated before the body of José Roberto: *the Church cannot remain silent at this time but must speak a word of hope and transcendence. In the struggle to obtain human rights here on earth, we must never forget that there is a God who judges and there is the reality of death that will eventually place us outside of history. There is a heaven and a hell. The justice of God is real and we call this the eschatological vision of the Church.* In these

hours of tragedy, bloodshed and pain, I want to plant this word of hope --- this eschatological word. I do this not to give opium to the people (as the communists say when they criticize the Church), but rather I do this by way of encouragement so that we might be more just here on earth and recognize that there is a Judge who will hold us accountable. I want to fill with hope the hearts of all those who have been the victims of violence during these days.

My third vision of this reality. A victim of the violence that occurred during this past week expressed his solidarity with others. Don Luis Chiurato came to me in tears. His whole family is weeping because, as you know, his wife and mother have mysteriously “disappeared”. He said: *I am almost certain that they are dead. But I give you this offering and ask you to celebrate Mass for them and for those who have died this week and for so many other victims of this endless tragedy.* I thank Don Luis and also express my solidarity with him. How great must be the anxiety of his family during this time of the mysterious disappearance of his family.¹ Together with him are so many other families who weep for those who have “disappeared” and never again appeared. We lift up our prayers for all of them, for those whom we do not know if they are dead or alive and for those whom we know with certainty have died as a result of this violence. Thus this morning, the prayer of the Archdiocese is a votive offering to the Lord. We pray that the Lord might give comfort and hope to so many families in anguish. We also pray that the Lord might give eternal rest to those who have passed beyond the shadows of life.

Finally my sisters and brothers, I have some other news about the life of our Church. Several of our priests are celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of their ordination. I also want to greet the community of Lourdes where they have prepared a group of young people to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. I also want to thank you for the many letters that have arrived on the occasion of naming Msgr. Urioste to succeed Bishop Rivera as vicar-general.

This week we celebrate two days filled with great hope: Tuesday, November 1st and Wednesday, November 2nd --- the feasts of All Saints and All Souls. As Christians we view our life on earth from the perspective of a life hereafter. Death does not end in the grave where we are entombed. We are entombed because we are asleep, awaiting the resurrection -- awaiting a day of All Saints on which we will encounter innumerable others who have never been elevated to the honor of official sainthood: family members, friends and companions. Let us unite ourselves to this army of the Blessed so that we might realize that the pilgrim life of the Christian does not end but that there is a God, who, with open arms, awaits us and who will then give true meaning to this life --- a life that while we were alive we never seemed to fully understand.

After listening to these signs of the times, Bishop Rivera is now going to interpret these in light of the gospel.

Signs of the times in the light of God’s word

Sisters and brothers, my first word can be no other than a cordial thankyou to the Archbishop for wishing to concelebrate with me at a time when I have said goodbye to the Archdiocese of San Salvador to take up the new charge the Holy Father has laid on me. He has explained the meaning of this concelebration, and I only want to underline something he has also said, that those who have worked together should pray together because such prayer is a wish that we will continue working together, united in our mutual

bond, in solidarity and in the real desire that our people will grow in faith, in living hope and putting into practice concrete acts of love.

The Archbishop has mentioned once again the events we have experienced recently. He always does this. In such a way that it seems easy for me to understand how God's word should enlighten our lives, not only our personal life, but also our life as a group, our collective life, our national and international life, because this word is light for the mind, energy for the will, warmth and feeling for our hearts, a spade that penetrates the depths, cutting bonds and freeing our spirit.

And I believe God's word helps us to judge the events we have experienced. The first reading from the Book of Wisdom shows God to be above everything. This is worth underlining since the book was written in Egypt by a Jew in Greek, but who had deep faith as a Jew. And in this land, he said all creation is like a grain of sand in the scales in comparison with God; that the whole world, compared with God, is like a drop of dew that falls in the morning, melts and evaporates. (b) And it is important what He says in that country, where things are worshiped and humans enslaved; where thanks to the work of slaves huge pyramids were built and still admired today, but how many died as slaves only knowing the slope and lever to move the massive carved boulders that formed the graceful pyramids of Egypt. He speaks to this people almost as if to remind us that men today should not make themselves Gods, should not worship wealth, power or pleasure.

The Book of Wisdom not only says this, but speaks of God almost as if we were reading the Gospel. It tells us this God is merciful, that he takes pity on all and everyone, that he closes his eyes to our sins that we may repent. (c) It speaks to us of God's mercy in two ways: one, that God always has mercy; and the other, that he has the power of remove the cause of grief. It is certainly difficult for us to image how God, as a spirit, could feel grief and suffering. But, to remove our doubt, God becomes man, like us in all things but sin; and now yes. He is not only merciful, but makes this mercy felt because he shares our suffering. And to share suffering does not only mean to take pity, but to suffer along with us. And so he can say I take pity on these people because he too is moved by physical suffering, by the blind, the deaf, the paralyzed, the lepers, the grief for death of loved ones, because – as the first Book of Wisdom puts it – the Lord is “*lover of life*” (d). So Jesus, the lover of life, is life we can have in abundance (e), and raises many from the dead as the Gospel recounts. But he goes deeper into sin as the cause of evil, forgives sins and feels pity for sinners; hence the beautiful parables he expresses: the lost sheep, the lost drachma, the prodigal son. (f) This is why he forgives and is concerned for those far from God, the woman in adultery; but especially those who have made earthly goods their gods. Today's gospel shows Jesus Christ's concern for those who worship money, bow before the golden calf, and who are not afraid to oppress, exploit and deal hard with those who serve them.

In today's gospel we see Our Lord as he walks through the streets of Jericho where there is a rich man, an important publican, who wishes to see him and has his wish granted. Since he is short in height, he climbs a tree and could never have imagined that Our Lord, cheered by the crowds, would notice him; but passing near, he lifts his eyes, sees him and calls him by name: “*Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today*”. (h) Hearing this, Zacchaeus comes down. But it was not mere curiosity because what he said, on hearing the malicious comments of those who saw Jesus enter his house, show us a man who for some time had felt the weight of sin on his conscience and, on seeing Jesus, declared: “*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". The Lord congratulated him and said: *"Today salvation has come to this house"*. (i) This is important because it shows that true conversion expresses itself in deeds. It is not enough to say one repents for sin, but necessary to repair the harm one has done; and as that publican, 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 refund four times those he had defrauded.

Sisters and brothers, the Gospel calls us to such a conversion. A conversion not only in our feelings but leads to a complete change and also teaches us how to share. The Archbishop told us that goods are created by God for all and therefore this plan of God must be respected.

We declare that God our Lord does not forget us, is concerned for us, speaks to us through creation, through his word, but above all through his Son Jesus, and today through the Church and through the members of this Church which, with the bishops, speaks to us through the priests their collaborators, and the faithful who share in the prophetic, priestly and royal mission of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us welcome this word and see that it is not something that falls in a broken sack, on the wayside, among thorns or on stones, but falls on good ground so that it can take seed and give thirty, sixty or a hundred percent. (j)

I end by thanking again the Archbishop for his gesture in concelebrating. I assure him that I hope this gesture will be the symbol of solidarity we can share and work together, he in the Archdiocese, and this brother of his in the Diocese of Santiago de María.

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

Margin References (a) Rm 8,20-21: (b) Ws 11,22: (c) Ws 11,23: (d) Ws 11,26: (e) Jn 10,10: (f) Lk 15,1-32: (g) Jn 8,1-11: (h) Lk 19,5: (i) Lk 19,8-9: (j) Mk 4,1-8.