

33rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

DAD'S ARMY was one of the best-loved comedy series on British TV. For the benefit of the very unfortunate and very few people who have never seen the show, they were light hearted programmes about a platoon of the Home Guard from an imaginary south-coast town during World War II. The Home Guard, affectionately known as "Dad's Army", was made up of civilian volunteers who were to serve as Britain's "last line of defence" in the event of an enemy invasion. Fat chance. Episode by episode, viewers were entertained by the make-believe adventures of this posse of the Home Guard, as they tried to cope with various unexpected turns of event. And whenever there was the slightest whiff of impending danger, viewers knew it was only a matter of time before the anxious voice of Lance Corporal Jones, the local butcher, would be heard, crying shrilly: "Don't panic ! Don't panic !" He was trying to calm his colleagues, but his voice and body language were so filled with signs of panic that his cries were certain to have the opposite effect to that intended.

If there's anything calculated to raise fears, and perhaps even panic, in the hearts of many of us, it's talk about the end, about the last day, about death, about the Lord's coming in judgement. Today, that's exactly the kind of talk we've been listening to, especially in the Gospel. A closer look at and understanding of the readings, however, will reveal that their overall message is more likely to inspire quiet confidence than the negative spirit of fear.

First there was a brief excerpt from the prophet Daniel, showing that a hundred years or so before the birth of Jesus, many Jews already believed in the resurrection of the dead and in an eternal life of fulfillment and happiness. Then came the passage from the letter to the Hebrews, which offered the surest possible grounds for confidence. It spoke of the glorious sacrifice offered by Jesus on the cross and assured us that that "one single sacrifice" achieved salvation for the whole human race.

In the Gospel Jesus tells us that while he is in no position to give us precise dates, we can be as sure of his second coming as a farmer can be sure of fruit on his fig trees in the appropriate season. But before then, Jesus adds, there will often enough be situations when it might seem as though the end has already come. During the terrible tsunami that struck south-east Asia on Boxing Day 2004, a reporter described how some of those caught up in the terrible disaster thought that the last day had arrived and so, instead of trying to escape, walked forward, hands

upraised as though in surrender, towards the towering waves and certain death.

However, when Jesus speaks of the last day he also shares the wonderful news that this is the day on which he will send out his angels “to gather his chosen ones from the four winds”. Because of our Baptism, we are among his chosen ones; each of us is able to make the words of the responsorial psalm our own: “Lord, it is you who are my portion and cup; it is you yourself who are my prize”. You see, Jesus does **not** want us to be weighed down with fearful, negative ideas about what his coming will mean; he does **not** want us to panic at the thought of the last day or of our death (which will be the last day of this world, so far as we are concerned). Of course it **will** also be a day of judgement, and if our whole life were to add up to a total rejection of God, well, the Lord respects us too much to force himself upon us. But as we gather here for Mass, the re-presentation of that great sacrifice which won our salvation, do we not have good reason for humble confidence ?

In his Gospel St John tells us that God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but to save it. Not to condemn but to save. That was the purpose of his coming among us, that was the purpose of his agonizing death on the cross and that will be the purpose of his coming again in glory – not to condemn but to save. And that is why we are able to mean those words that are prayed at every Mass: “we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.”