

Joseph Augustine Fitzmyer SJ was a biblical scholar who served as President of the Catholic Biblical Association, an honor that fewer than 1% of Catholic scholars will ever receive. He was one of the leaders of the rebirth of Catholic Scripture scholarship, and taught at a protestant seminary: Union Theological in NYC.

His assessment of Luke 21:5ff is worth noting: “This discourse is very complicated and one of the most difficult parts of the gospel tradition to interpret. There are almost as many interpretations of it as there are heads that think about it.”

The vocabulary speaks of extreme violence: “You,” Jesus tells his followers, “will be delivered” and “will be led to death” by those who usually guarantee protection and well-being. It is certainly not a question of murder, but of death sentences as a result of denunciations by members of one’s family.

Earlier in Luke (14:26) we hear Jesus say, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and even his own soul as well, he cannot be my disciple.” Hate in this connection is not an emotion but an act: parting with what was closest to one’s heart. Since Jesus’ followers burned their bridges with their families, they have caused their own rejection.

Jesus warns that faith will create tension with the values of the dominant culture. He also warns that sometimes all we can do is “bear witness” with our lives. When we do not clutch our lives as possessions but patiently persevere in doing what is right, we gain our souls.

Gaining our souls is not a matter of getting what one does not have but of establishing forever one’s “property rights.” Earlier in Luke’s gospel, Jesus proffers “whoever wishes to save his soul will lose it; but whosoever loses his soul for my sake, this one will save it. What profit is there for a man gaining the whole cosmos but losing—or being deprived of—himself/his soul?”

Luke is thinking here of God’s eschatological protection in the kingdom or after death. Viewed in the long term, only Providence counts in Luke’s eyes. For Luke, the violence of those who forfeit their souls for power in this world is overcome in the providence of God’s eternal protection.

Faithfully, fitfully, our lives are testimony to our view of reality. “Materialism” or “naturalism” or “physicalism”—the doctrine that there is nothing apart from the physical order—believes in a world that may be glorious, terrible, beautiful, horrifying—all of that—but in the end it is also, quite meaningless. The secret of a happy life then, is either

not to notice or not to let it bother one overly much. A few blithe spirits even know how to rejoice at the thought.

Luke's vision of reality holds to the Providence of God, the God who is the source and ground and end of all reality, the infinite well-spring of all that is, by whom we know and are known.

In the language of St Augustine, God is beyond our utmost heights and more inward to us than our inmost depths. In the language of scripture, God is the reality in whom we live and move and have our being, in whom we find our only true consummation.

With our lives we testify to the vision of reality we hold: one that is ultimately absurd or one that is fulfilled in the Providence of God.