

Trust in God

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues” (v10-11)

Listening to Jesus speak to the disciples and other followers gathered around him, you could be forgiven for thinking that he was speaking to us and giving a summary of the latest news report.

The temple in Jerusalem had been refurbished and rebuilt by Herod. It was a massive, sturdy stone structure, ornately decorated with the best that the world could supply. It was awesome and awe-inspiring.

Sitting in the temple only a few days before he will be arrested, tried and crucified, Jesus tells the crowd that the day will come when the temple will be torn down and not one stone will be with another. Not the deterioration of age or neglect but by deliberate destruction.

That anyone could destroy the temple, and that anyone would utterly destroy it is incomprehensible to the crowd. Bewildered and confused, someone asks, so, when will we know that this is going to happen?

Jesus responds that before any of this happens that the followers will be arrested, persecuted and put in prison. They will be betrayed by parents and brothers, their relatives and friends and some of them will be put to death. They will be hated by all because of Jesus' name.

This is not the sort of sales pitch that most marketing agencies would recommend to their customers to attract new people.

All in all, it speaks to a disruptive and dangerous future.

Throughout history there have been groups or sects who have believed that they are living in the end times that Jesus is referring to. From the first century Essenes of Qumran to the twentieth century Branch Davidians of Waco.

Because all of these movements, have to-date, have been proven wrong, it is easy for us to scoff at the naiveté of “drinking the Kool-Aid”—a term that refers to the 1978 suicide of members of Jim Jones's cult, the People's Temple, who were ordered by him to drink grape-flavored juice laced with potassium cyanide.

Jesus tells his followers that as massive and sturdy as the temple is, it is not permanent, and its beauty is fleeting. By the time that Luke wrote his gospel the Romans had destroyed the temple, taking the valuables and tearing down the walls. Nothing, as Jesus tells us, is permanent. Our perspective as humans is limited by virtue of our human nature. Our hope is shaped by the permanence of what surround us.

Jesus also warns the believers not to presume that the time of war and destruction is permanent either. Europe may have had the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) which is 116 years, and the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), they may have felt permanent for those affected at the time, but ... both of the wars did end.

The Jews and the Christians were devastated by the destruction of the temple in the year 70. Wondering how they could continue to worship. Despite wars, earthquakes, famines and plagues, despite persecution and hate, two thousand years later we can say that both

Judaism and Christianity, through the grace of God, are flourishing. The time that Jesus is referring to has not arrived, yet.

Their practices may have changed somewhat, but their core beliefs and faith in God have not waived.

This was not the first time that the Jews had dealt with the loss of their temple. It was destroyed in 587 when many of the Jews were exiled to Babylon. Yet, as they return to Israel many years later, Isaiah gives them the promise from God that we heard in the first reading:
“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.” (Isaiah 65:17-18)

Out of the old, something new will arise that will be a joy and a delight.

Our tangible world is fleeting. We can become trapped in what was and what is, trapped in what feels permanent, sturdy and secure. Whether it is peace and the familiar or war and disruption.

Wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, persecution and hate swirl around us.

The cost of housing, groceries and transportation, job insecurity and health concerns, for ourselves and for our loved ones, continue to be a worry for many.

Life in our parish has been greatly disrupted, making change inevitable.

We crave the permanence of the temple, something that does not change, that is bigger and sturdier than we are, that we can rely and depend upon, that is familiar and comfortable, (even if the seats are cold and hard).

It is uncomfortable and even scary to step into the unfamiliar and the unknown.

Paul, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, reminds us that sitting idly by, waiting for the world to change, or to go back to what it was, or the end to come is not a viable option. The work of being a community, the work of being the body of Christ is the work of all the members.

As we figure out who we were, who we are, and who we are called to be as a community, I invite you to recall the words of the canticle of Isaiah who gives assurance from God to the people that they will return home from Babylon to Israel and to trust God. Isaiah’s promise is that the people will give thanks and say:
“Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.” (Isaiah 12:2)

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Readings: Luke 21:5-19
Isaiah 65:17-25
Isaiah 12:2-6
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13