

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
13 November 2022

Luke 21:5-19

It is within the human heart to love institutions. Grand buildings make us think of greatness, permanence, invincibility. When you look at buildings such as the White House, the national cathedral, or the pentagon, just to mention a few, we get this feeling that we stand on solid ground. As long as those buildings are standing, our democracy is safe and we remain the most powerful nation on earth. It is the same surreal feeling when you look at the Statue of Liberty, or any of the monuments in Washington, DC. We feel pride, gratitude, and great admiration for the grandeur of those buildings and we get the feeling that despite our problems, we remain an amazing nation.

It was the same for most Jews during the time of Jesus. The temple had taken 80 years to rebuild and Herod the Great spared no expense to make it the most beautiful temple Israel had ever seen. The floors were covered in beautiful marble, there was a great curtain made of Egyptian embroidery and fabrics which separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. There were doors made of solid silver and gold. And the vessels used for the sacrifices were adorned with precious stones and made of solid gold. The place was truly magnificent.

The words of Jesus today sent shivers down the back of his listeners. He says, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." The disciples and apostles had just been commenting on how grand the temple was, and now Jesus is announcing that it will all come down soon enough. If anyone had told New Yorkers in the year 2,000 that someday the World Trade Towers would be utterly destroyed, they would have been as shocked and dismayed. If anyone had told any of us a few years back that our capitol would be bridged and our sacred institutions violated, we would not have believed it. But in fact both of these events took place, and the Temple was in fact destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. The point that Jesus is trying to make is that no institution lasts forever. No building and no structure lasts forever. It doesn't matter how adorned and how beautiful they are, they don't last forever. What this means is that the disciples, and us as well, must place our hopes on something else because no institution, no building, no statue or monument, and no strong political figure will be able to save us.

The disciples don't argue with Jesus and they don't challenge the prophesy. This could mean a few things: First, since the Gospel of Luke was written between AD 80 and 85, Luke already knows that the Temple has fallen. Many believe that this passage rather than being predictive is stating already known facts. For those who believe Jesus' words

are predicting a future yet to come, they point to the fact that the disciples trusted Jesus to be the Messiah, and because of this trust in him, they accepted his prophesy without challenge. In either case, they don't ask why or how. All they ask is when. When will these things happen? They want to be prepared. They want to make sure they run for the hills when the great devastation takes place.

It is in response to the "When" question that Jesus gives us the real focus and importance of this passage. Jesus' prophesy is not so much about the destruction of the Temple and/or the destruction at the end of days, as much as it is about God's protection of the disciples at times of crisis. Jesus knows he is about to be arrested and killed. He knows his disciples will be scattered, persecuted, imprisoned, and some will be killed. He knows that there is a tendency to place our trust and our hope in institutions, especially at times of crisis. And he knows that many of these institutions will become antagonistic to the Church and to his disciples. They will be betrayed even by their own relatives and friends. Families will turn against families. They will be made to stand alone before tribunals and judges. They will be crucified, thrown to the lions in the coliseum, and burnt at the stake. The powers of evil will do all in their power to annihilate the Church of God, which makes Jesus' words so important for them.

Jesus says, "they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name." But then Jesus makes an outstanding claim. He says "Don't worry about preparing a defense when this happens. I will give you the words of wisdom for a defense at the right time." In fact, these arrests and persecutions will give the disciples, "an opportunity to testify." These persecutions will be important for the advancement of the Church. Every drop of blood, every antagonistic cry, every hour of imprisonment will provide opportunities to testify about Jesus of Nazareth and the power of his resurrection. The Church will be built on the blood of the martyrs. The good news, however, is that no human power, regardless of how mighty it seems, will have the power to destroy the Church of God. Jesus tells his friends, "You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish." Not one hair of your head will be forgotten by God, not one second of your efforts to build the Church will be ignored by God, not one single word uttered in prayer to God will be unheard. God will be in the midst of the persecution, and he himself will guide the Church to its ultimate destination. The disciples must place their trust in God and God alone. Not on buildings or institutions. Not on strong leaders, whether they be popes or bishops. Only God has the power to save.

Jesus ends this passage with the following words, "By your endurance you will gain your souls." This invitation to endurance is a welcome invitation for our Church today. Many in the world are beginning to talk about the last days of Christianity. They see the Christian faith, ethic, and lifestyle quickly disappearing from the earthly stage.

They see secularism advancing and churches becoming more and more empty. They see declining budgets, ministries closing, and churches disappearing from the world's landscape. Great shrines now housing pubs and restaurants. Great cathedrals with less than 30 people on Sunday mornings. General antagonism to Christianity at major universities and cultural centers. And an erosion of trust in Christianity and institutions in the new generations around the globe. They believe we are in a post-Christian era. Yet, I keep thinking about Jesus' last words in this passage. "By your endurance you will gain the soul of the Church and your own individual soul."

Endurance is the key. This is a term often repeated in the New Testament, especially in the book of Revelation. Those who endure will receive a crown of glory. Those who endure in faithfulness will see God. We must have faith in Christ and we must endure, doing our part to live out the gospel of Jesus with authenticity and passion. Regardless of what assaults come our way, God will have a Church for the future and a future for his Church. We may one day look very different to how we look today, but the Church will continue. God himself will be with us to the end of the age, and he will not allow his Church to disappear for the earthly stage until we are reunited with him. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The Church is here to stay. We must endure because Jesus is with us and his Holy Spirit is actively working in us and in our midst. All we need to do is open our eyes to see his amazing works in our world today.

Whatever might be happening in your life today, please know that Jesus is with us and nothing has the power to separate us from him. Have courage, endure in your faith, place your cares at the foot of the cross, and trust that God will do the rest. Amen!