

SECOND SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT 17.11.19

Luke 21:5-19

We are at the end of the Church year. In fact, next Sunday, which is Christ the King Sunday, is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. So, it makes sense that the scriptures for this Sunday address the end of the world. In today's gospel Jesus speaks of the future; of the devastation to come before the end of the material world as we know it.

But let's talk about the context of this conversation. Some of the people around Jesus were remarking by the beauty of the temple in Jerusalem. That temple was not just the centre of the Jews' civilisation: it was the place where God lived among them. But Jesus told them that it was all going to fall apart! "...not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down" (Luke 21:6).

This is an apocalyptic expression. We know, apocalyptic visions reveal hidden truths about God, the course of human life, and the spiritual world. Apocalyptic literature has features in common with both prophecy and poetry. Like prophecy, apocalyptic literature may speak to the future of God's people and a coming day of judgment. Like poetry, apocalyptic literature uses symbols and intense images to describe realities that cannot be communicated any other way.

Turns out, Jesus was right. Luke wrote this Gospel a decade or more after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. Titus, a Roman general, with 80,000 men, began a siege of Jerusalem. It was a difficult city to take, set on a hill, and defended to the death. Jesus had told his followers to flee to the mountains when that day came, but instead they crammed into the city. The result was famine and terror. At the end the Holy Place was burnt down; and Titus ordered the whole city and the Temple to be razed to the ground. Josephus, the historian, who was actually there, tells us that 97,000 were taken captive and enslaved and that 1,100,000 died.

The Holy of Holies, a place so sacred that only the high priest could enter it once a year, was plundered. All that is left of this mighty monument in Jerusalem today is the "Wailing Wall". For many Jews it must have seemed like the end of the world. Early writings of Christianity focused on what they believed was the imminent end of the world and the return of Christ in judgment.

Luke uses the destruction of this magnificent temple to make a statement on the impermanence of human achievement. In response to their wonder at the temple's beauty, Jesus attempts to divert the attention of his audience from their fascination with "these things that you see" (21:6). Their focus should be on something else. What exactly will see later on.

Sometimes existing structures must go. Jesus prophesied that the temple would be destroyed, heralding a revolution in faith. If we are not willing to move forward in faith, God may destroy what we have built for our own good.

We should remember, the real house of God are people (Ephesians 2:18-20). We are the living stones (1 Peter 2:4-6) in a spiritual temple. Our hope is in a permanent structure being built by Jesus Christ. If we build with him, we will not be disappointed. Jesus placed spiritual depth before buildings. A good building has a foundation that stands firm. We are to stand firm. Jesus listed things that help us stand firm: Don't following false preachers who make wild claims about salvation and the end of the world. Do not be frightened. In the midst of calamity and hatred, stand firm on God's foundation.

There are many reasons for fear. Jesus informed believers about the reality of fearful times, but encouraged them not to be afraid. Every aspect of our lives, even the hairs on our heads are under God's control. It takes faith to stand firm until the end. Jesus does not promise us a rose garden here on earth. In fact, he makes it quite clear to us and his disciples that people will hate them and persecute them. He doesn't tell the disciples that they will escape pain, and he doesn't tell us that either. He promises that the persecutions that his followers will face will give them opportunities to witness to the Gospel.

Martyr also means testimony. 50 countries which persecute Christians are on the list at Open Doors. The Voice of the Martyrs tells many of their stories. May we pray for them and follow their example by standing firm no matter what may come, so that we too "will win life."

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus shares three keys to witnessing:

1. Deciding not to worry.
2. Deciding to stand firm.
3. Deciding to live a radically different lifestyle.

We know that even the tribulations and catastrophes to come. Even the beauty of this world; All are terminal... and yet... Nothing can separate us from Christ.

Not even the devastation and catastrophe of the end of this world as we know it. All material things are temporary, transitory, terminal. What is unseen is eternal. So what remains? Those three remain: Faith, Hope and Love. But the greatest of these is love. Jesus' love for us; our love for Him; our love for each other. These are the permanent things; we should be focused on.