

SERMON- LUKE 21:5-19 (Joan Facey)

This particular gospel reading apparently gives shivers to seasoned preachers. It made me very nervous when I looked at it a couple of weeks ago. So, the best I can do is take a look at it in a couple of different ways.

First from an historical perspective. The temple referred to in the passage was the centre of Jewish life both for religious and social purposes. As well, there was trade going on, such as the buying and selling of offerings and money changers. In the temple the Jews worshiped and fulfilled the requirements of the laws they followed. Once a year on the day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter into the Holy of Holies and sacrifice an unblemished animal to God on behalf of the people of Israel in order to cleanse them from sin. The area of the temple was around 36 acres. It was the size of 5 football fields. Some of the marble columns were imbedded with precious gems and here is where we find the disciples admiring its beauty. And here is where Jesus tells them the temple will be destroyed. Not a stone will be left standing. All will be thrown down, flattened, and will appear as if it had never existed.

And it was as Jesus predicted. Some 40 years after his crucifixion death and resurrection, the Roman Empire became tired of Jewish uprisings and revolts against their authority. They seized the Temple after a standoff and destroyed it. Shortly after this the Romans brought ruin to the entire city of Jerusalem. The historian of the time, a man named Josephus, said one million were slaughtered and 600,000 carried away to other parts of the empire as slaves or forced labour. (Both these figures likely exaggerated).

Back in the Gospel reading, Jesus tells about many wars and natural disasters. He tells the followers they will be persecuted and some killed for their faith. Households will be divided and family will hate each other because of Jesus. But during all this persecution, the church will prevail. Not a building, but a people. Jesus tells them they need not worry about defending themselves when they are accused, for Jesus will give them words to say. Many will lose their lives; we can't pretend times were easy. For nearly three centuries after Jesus' death, Christians would face severe hardship. Not until the Roman Emperor Constantine came to power and was converted to Christianity, would Christians have peace for a time. But the scripture says, 'even if you die for your faith - by your endurance you will gain your soul'. We are very fortunate here in Canada. We don't face any overt persecution. Although we may be faced with more subtle kinds of harassment. Things like you can be a Christian, just keep it to yourself.

But many parts of the world are unsafe for people of faith and they need our prayers.

The message for us in this passage, is, as Jesus said then, and says to us today, stay strong, keep faith, and our reward will be great. Our destruction may not be a building or a city but perhaps a diagnosis. One that may be life threatening. A child's behaviour may be causing great angst to the parents. A horrific accident may impact our life or the lives of those we love. Jesus says in Matthew's gospel "blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you... for my sake". In John's gospel we have the words of Jesus saying, "in the world you face persecution but take courage I have conquered the world". So let us believe those words. Make Christ your Rock, with a capital R! Your anchor in stormy seas that holds fast against all the tumult around you. He is ever present, never abandoning us, his brothers and sisters. As he promised those whom he spoke to two thousand years ago, the promise still stands today. Amen.