

As we approach the end of the liturgical year, the lectionary readings turn to focus on the end times. In our Gospel reading this morning from Luke, Jesus predicts that the grand temple in Jerusalem will be thrown down, nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, dreadful portents—earthquakes, famines, and plagues—will abound, parents and children, friends and relatives will betray one another. Jesus is speaking of the final apocalypse—the time when God will judge humanity in the last days—and he is warning his disciples to be prepared for those times.

Lesser apocalypses are a part of all our lives. We have all experienced times when the world as we know it has been shaken to its foundations, when the things and people we have believed in and counted on seem to have betrayed or abandoned us. It does us well then to pay attention to what scripture has to say about such times so that we might be prepared to face the final end days and the new beginning that follows, whenever they may occur, but so we might be equipped as well for those endings in our daily lives, those times when our personal and private worlds are shaken to the core, those times when the walls of the temples we have constructed in our own lives come tumbling down. For just as surely as the grand temple constructed by King Herod crumbled 40 years after Jesus said that it would, so the temples in our own lives, those human things in which we place our trust, will also collapse from time to time in our lives.

Those of you who have gone through divorce know what I mean; those of you who have lost a job and were in danger of losing your home know what I mean; those of you confronted by a critical medical diagnosis, know what I mean; those of you who have endured the calamity of natural disaster, know what I mean; and those of you bereaved by the loss of a life partner, a son or a daughter, know what I mean. The world as you know it comes to an end. Those things, those people, those events you have relied upon, trusted in, believed in, are either gone or they have turned against you.

Such times test our faith and test our God. Many people, when the temples of they have constructed in their lives collapse reach in desperation to anyone or anything who promises to bring deliverance—be it the TV evangelist who promises restoration to whoever provides a substantial donation, the latest miracle cure for cancer available at some private clinic in Bulgaria; the newest guru or soothsayer who promises to restore balance to your life; or the charismatic leader who offers simple solutions to complex problems. Jesus warns his disciples, and he warns us, that this can be a serious mistake.

After Jesus spoke of the destruction of the temple and the coming of the last days, his disciples asked him: Teacher, when will this take place?" Jesus responded: "Beware that you are not led astray: for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he' and 'the time is near.' Do not go after them."

"Do not go after them." The best thing we can do when our world is collapsing is to stand fast and hold on to what we know is sure and true—to the rock which cannot move, to the anchor which holds us safe and fast. God is that rock, that anchor, for us. Even when we doubt, even when we convince ourselves that we are somehow to blame for what has happened or even worse that God has abandoned us or turned against us, we need to hold fast to the conviction that God is for us and with us, even during the darkest times. God in Christ has promised us that we will never be alone, that God is always with us.

Jesus admonishes his disciples and he admonishes us not to dwell on when the last judgement will come. He warns us not to be consumed by fear and to concern ourselves with making preparations—digging a bomb shelter in the backyard, storing up a year's worth of food and water in the basement, joining some survivalist cult. Rather we are to trust God and continue to live as God calls us to live. No matter how dark and desperate the times, continue to love your neighbour, continue to forgive your enemy, continue to reach out to the lost and the lonely, continue to serve the needy and forgotten, continue to stand up for justice. Now Jesus is under no illusions—he knows this can be difficult, especially when our world seems to be collapsing around us—but by holding firm and living our faith, even when everything seems lost, we save our souls. We become lights shining in the darkness that provide a glimpse of the kingdom, the new creation to come. Trust in God to bring you through the times of test and tribulation and, Jesus promises, not a hair on our heads will perish.

And we know this to be true. Out of that divorce, when what is right is done as much as it can be, can come a new wholeness in which stronger, healthier relationships can emerge. Out of that layoff can come a whole new course of life, one which we never imagined. Out of that cancer diagnosis, can come a whole new appreciation for living life to the fullest day by day. Out of that natural disaster can come a whole new set of priorities. Out of that bereavement can come a new understanding of the meaning of life and a new way of living it with gratitude and thankfulness.

As Christians, we are called to make witness, to testify to God as this world passes; we are called to continue the work of building God's kingdom, here and now, in this world and in this life, even as the darkness of the old world grows around us, knowing that the night becomes darkest just before the new dawn.

As we look at scriptures like those that were read today, scriptures concerning the end of things and the new beginning that follows that end, and then look at the world around us—with all its fulness of signs and portents—it makes little sense for us to engage in debate as to whether the time is now, or a bit later, especially when we know in our deepest hearts that for each us personally the time is coming or has already come when our world is shaken and our humanly constructed temples—those places of our pride and joy and our sense of security—have fallen or will yet fall, knowing that in the midst of our darkness, God has promised to be there with us. Rather, let us face the world with confidence, trusting God to lead us through all life's trials and tribulations, and continuing to do our part in building up God's kingdom as beacons of light shining brightly in the darkness.