

Sermon for 14 November 2010

25 Pentecost; Proper 28, Year C

+ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Amen.

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "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."

We hear haunting words in today's Gospel, and they are not to be taken lightly. Every year at about this time, the lectionary turns to what we call "eschatology", last things, the bible's witness to the oftentimes frightening nature of all that leads up to the world to come. Wars and

insurrections, earthquakes and famines and plagues, dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

These are what Jesus tells us will happen, and it rousts us out of our complacency pretty quickly.

Interestingly, these were also Jesus' words of admonition to his disciples, who were at that time speaking idly about how lovely the Jerusalem temple was.

We learn from the first century historian Josephus, that the temple was indeed grand. It was built like a royal cloister, with magnificent purple drapes, vines made of gold, huge stone doors that could be seen from a great distance. The temple itself was enormous, one of the largest edifices on earth at the time. But, that God's house was a touch ostentatious was not in itself a bad thing. It was God's house. It was built in His honor, and its splendor was meant to reflect His glory.

The problem arose when the disciples got too caught up in the building for its own sake and forgot that its grandeur was only a dim reflection of God's glory. Whatever we mortals construct in an effort to honor God will eventually be destroyed. They are ultimately finite. They are finally insufficient. Like us, the works of our hands shall come to naught.

This does not, however, let us off the hook. It does not exempt us from the responsibility of honoring God and working to do His will. It is in the end, though, a reality check: a reminder that the Kingdom of God does not depend on the work of our own hands, but on the infinite grace and power of Him who made us. All the temples we construct are among those things which will pass away.

So, why do we build these temples? Why do we construct grand cathedrals, and develop programs, and work tirelessly in all manner of church related activities if it will all pass away? We do these

things, knowing full well that all shall return to the dust. Why? We do them because we are meant to be witnesses, and all that the Church does is (or should be) toward the end of God's mission, that all should be restored to unity with Him in Christ. In this time between our Lord's life on earth and His coming again, we are called to point both backward and forward. We are called to point back toward Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as we also point forward to the day of His return. The grandeur of our churches and the beauty and solemnity of our liturgies and the educational programs we develop and the works of Christian charity we undertake, all these things must serve to point beyond ourselves to Christ our king who is to come.

And so, our work is not in vain but we must remember what is the nature of the work that we are about. Christ will usher in the Kingdom in God's good time, and we are admonished to avoid those who

would speculate about when and how. Our part is to witness to that Kingdom; to point to it, as it were; to pray that Christ might be made known to those who know Him not; to tell the old, old story to a world yearning to hear it; and to wait in eager expectation for that day, even amid things that are passing away. As a friend and mentor of mine once said, we Christians are in advertising, not management.

To put our responsibility in more extravagant terms, we are all called to be martyrs. The Greek word we translate as martyr in the New Testament really means witness in the legal sense of the word. We are not, thank God, necessarily called to die for the faith. It is, however, our bounden obligation to be witnesses to Christ: to be those who are able to point to him as the source of light and life, who is coming again. For a few this does mean death, but for all it means sacrifice. "They will arrest you and persecute you," Jesus tells His

disciples, "they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name...You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name." The way of the cross is not all sweetness and light. It is occasionally (or more than occasionally) painful and onerous, if we're doing it right. Yet it is in the way of the cross that we find our greatest joy. To quote a popular William Alexander Percy hymn, which I've quoted here before:

The peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife closed in the sod.
Yet, brothers, pray for but one thing-
The marvelous peace of God.

In this in-between time, we will experience not a little discomfort if we are striving to do God's work. Even so, we have every reason in the world to press on, for ours is the God who cares for His

people and shall put all things to rights. As God said to the prophet Malachi, "For you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." And as our Lord said, "not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." We keep striving because we know that death is not the end. We know that the Lord comes swiftly, and then we shall meet Him face to face.

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Amen.