

Your Redemption Is Drawing Near

In the name of him who comes to judge the earth, dear friends in Christ: Forty plus years of expansions and upgrades had made the Lord's temple in Jerusalem the largest and arguably the most elaborate complex of religious structures on the face of the earth. So it's small wonder that as this morning's Gospel begins, we hear the disciples of Jesus marveling at the whole affair and discussing the awe and grandeur of the massive columns and stones. Together they exuded a sense of indestructibility and permanence – not just because of their sheer size and splendor, which were indeed impressive, but even more because of what they collectively stood for: the house of the Lord's glory, God's throne room and dwelling place on earth. Surely, the disciples thought, this place will be here forever. As the psalmist said, "The Lord God is in her, she cannot be shaken."

Oh yes she can, Jesus tells his astonished followers. "You see all this? The days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." It was a horrifying statement. The disciples could barely wrap their heads around it. It was hard enough for them to imagine the amount of sheer force and effort that it would take to destroy the place physically, but it was even harder for them to think that God would allow such a thing.

They must have forgotten their history. It had happened 600 years earlier with the magnificent temple built here in the same place in the days of King Solomon. Then, because of the people's ongoing sin and idolatry, and their stubborn refusal to repent and return to him, the Lord God turned the place over to the enemies of his people. He allowed his temple to be destroyed, completely leveled to the ground. But before he did, he left the building. His people had so defiled the place that he couldn't stand to stay there any longer. So his glory departed. He said essentially, you reject me long enough, you consistently resist the call of my prophets to repent, and there comes the day when I will reject you. Funny, the people back then didn't believe it either. Though the prophets warned them, they thought that day would never come. They were wrong.

The disciples, fortunately, knew better than to argue with Jesus. If he said it was going to happen, it would – and for precisely the same reason. It was because the people of Jerusalem and their religious leaders did not know the day of their visitation. Here the Lord God himself was present among them in the person of Jesus graciously calling them to repent and to return to him. But they rejected him. And the day would come when he would return the favor and reject them also.

Naturally, this dire warning by Jesus of events that would take place in the future piqued the curiosity of the disciples. They wanted to know more. So they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when they are about to take place?"

The answer Jesus gives in response to their question follows a pattern we see in many biblical prophecies in which there is a short term fulfillment of what is forecast for the future, which in turn is a picture of a later, much bigger fulfillment of the prophecy. In this case, the upcoming fall and destruction of Jerusalem – which happened in AD 70, some forty years after Jesus spoke these words – is a prophetic picture of the end and destruction of all things that will happen at the end of the age in preparation for the Lord's recreation of the new heavens and earth. The thing to see is that the general description of how things will be for the faithful

leading up to the first event is pretty much the same as they will be throughout the entire age leading up to the second. You'll note that Jesus doesn't answer their question regarding *when* these ends will come; his primary focus is on telling his followers what they can expect to see and experience before the end comes so that they will be prepared to face it when it does come.

First he warns them not to be led astray. They are to hold fast to his teaching as he gave it to them, and not to be deceived by the many who would come in his name proclaiming false christs with false gospels. The apostles of Jesus dealt with a number of them already in their day, most notably the Judaizers who confused the Gospel with the Law and taught people that they were responsible in part for earning their own salvation, and also the Gnostics who denied the goodness of God's material creation and taught that in Jesus God did not take on human flesh and blood. The number of false christs being proclaimed in the world has grown exponentially since then. And mind you, these false christs are being proclaimed in churches that call themselves Christian: from the cults like Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter Day Saints; to the mainline liberal churches (both Protestant and Catholic) who deny basic truths like the virgin birth, the miracles of Jesus, and his bodily resurrection; to the Jesus of the health and wealth gospel, who isn't so much concerned with your sin but rather in ensuring that you are rich, comfortable, and happy – all these and many more are leading people away from the true Christ who saves to false christs who cannot and do not save. And that is why Jesus warns us to hold fast to his truth as he and his original apostles taught it.

He also warns them to disregard the date setters, those who say that they know when "the time is at hand." Again, Jesus doesn't tell us *when*. He said regarding that day and hour no one knows. But that hasn't stopped imposters in every decade since from imagining that they have somehow cracked the Bible's secret code and can pinpoint on a calendar the date of Christ's return. The sad thing is there are always so many people who are taken in by it. I mean, in view of what Jesus said, if someone comes along saying they know when it will be, it's like they're wearing a sign around their neck that says "Beware. Don't listen to me. I am a false teacher."

From there Jesus goes on to describe general conditions throughout the world that will continue: wars and disturbances, nations rising against nations, earthquakes, famines, epidemic diseases, great storms ... in other words, life as it's always been happening in this fallen world. On the political side of things, the rise and fall of nations and their ongoing conflicts with each other, these remind us not to place our hope in the princes of this world. The only way to achieve world peace and universal prosperity will be to get rid of all the sinners in the world. And the Lord will do that one day. Until then there will be feuding, fussing, and fighting. And we ought not attach any prophetic significance to it. Yes, we do what we can to restrain evil – by force when necessary – and to help the poor and needy. But we do so knowing that that these will be ongoing struggles until the end.

With regard to natural disasters and epidemics of disease, these remind us that creation itself is under the curse of human sin longing to be set free, and that death can come to any of us suddenly and unexpectedly. Therefore we ought to be at all times prepared through repentance and faith in Christ.

And speaking of faith in Christ, Jesus next warns that his followers can expect to be persecuted for it. Certainly the apostles experienced it. All but one of them died for confessing their faith in Jesus. The other was banished to a tiny island for his faith. But many thousands of others died in the most horrible ways in those first several centuries simply for refusing to deny the Lord Jesus. Things have not changed much in that regard. According to reliable sources

more Christians were killed for their faith in the 20th century than in all the preceding centuries combined. That we don't see it happening here doesn't mean it's not going on elsewhere. But even here where we have a constitutional right to religious freedom, believers are increasingly coming under attack for their faith and biblical moral values. The ever downward slide of our society's sense of ethics guarantees that it's only going to get worse.

As unpleasant as that sounds, history shows that the Church of Jesus Christ thrives under persecution, and for a number of reasons. First, it separates the truly faithful from those who are only playing at it. Persecution cuts away the deadwood, and forces the faithful back to the means of grace by which their faith is strengthened and to prayer by which their faith is exercised. Second, the Light of Christ shines most brightly in the darkness. When the members of Christ's body show love and compassion for their enemies, it burns the consciences of those who hate us. And finally, persecution provides the Church with its most effective opportunities to witness to the truth. As Jesus says, "They will lay their hands on you, delivering you up to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict."

For an example of this we have St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Though a layman and not a trained theologian, when brought before the ruling council of the Jews he preached eloquently and with such truthful conviction that those who heard him could not refute a thing he said. So instead they covered their ears to stop listening and resorted to deadly violence to silence him. Now, you may be thinking that's not the best example I could have used because of the way things turned out; but my point is that Jesus was with him in that trial, by his Spirit giving him the words to say. And Jesus was with him at the end, receiving Stephen into glory and crowning him with life that can never be taken away. Stephen didn't lose anything he wasn't going to lose anyway. But in the process, he won the victor's crown. And so will we if we continue faithful until the end.

Continuing this foretelling of what his followers can expect to experience in the time before the end, Jesus warns us that just as he was hated and rejected by the world, so will we who bear his name – even, in some cases, by our closest family members. Yes, we may have to suffer some painful and difficult ordeals – both physical and emotional – but he promises that in the end not a hair of our heads will be lost.

At this point in the discourse, Jesus gives some more detail about the short term fulfillment of his words regarding the end of Jerusalem and the Jewish state. He tells then that when they see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, it's time to get out and head for the hills. Having been thus forewarned, we know that during the Jewish revolt of AD 70, the Christians in Judea and Jerusalem did exactly that. When the three Roman armies commanded by General Titus converged on the rebellious city, they packed up what they could carry and fled. They lived. The fanatical Jews who rejected Christ as their Savior and who remained behind did not.

And so it will be also at the end of the present age, which Jesus describes next in terms that speak of the undoing of creation: signs in the sun, moon, and stars; great distress of nations, people fainting with fear and foreboding, the powers of the heavens being shaken – all of which sounds terribly frightful. And so it will be for those who don't know what it means. But for those of us who do, who listen to Jesus, who trust him as our Savior from sin, who know and trust the power of his resurrection, and who know the good things he has promised to those who remain faithful until the end, to us he says when you see all these things taking place, don't run,

don't cower and hide; no, "Straighten up and raise your head, because your redemption is drawing near." It's not bad news; it's good. It's only the end of all that is wrong and evil. It's the beginning of a world that is perfect and good.

The disciples of Jesus could not imagine a day when Jerusalem and its grand temple would come to an end. But that day surely came. And when it did, they were prepared for it. In the same way it can be hard for us to imagine this world that seems so permanent coming to its end. But as we sang – and more importantly, as Jesus tells us – that day is surely drawing near when we will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Even so, come Lord Jesus; and pray, by your Word and Spirit, keep us prepared to receive you with hopeful joy. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!