

Hold Fast

In the name of him who is faithful to keep all of his promises, dear friends in Christ: It's impossible to overstate the importance of the Jerusalem Temple to the Jewish people who lived at the time of Christ – or at any earlier time, for that matter. Unlike the Greeks who could boast of their famous philosophers, scientists, and play writers, all of whom influenced the thinking of the world, or the Romans who could boast of their military might, their great engineering feats like roads and aqueducts, and their just and thorough legal system with which they ran the world so efficiently, the Jews looked to the Temple in Jerusalem to give them their sense of identity and purpose in the world. It was for them the tangible sign of their favored status as God's chosen people. It was, after all, the one place on earth that the Lord God had chosen to make his dwelling among men. And it had stood the test of time: over five hundred years. In that time it had seen empires of men come and go. There was every reason to believe it would outlast the Romans and their empire too. At the time of Jesus' ministry, thanks to an immense forty year renovation and expansion project, the Temple and its surrounding complex looked every bit a structure fit for its noble purpose. Its massive stones, some of which weighed more than forty tons, helped create the impression that it would last forever. That was a comforting thought to the Jews. It gave them a sense of pride, security, and *permanence*. More than that, because of the popular messianic expectations of the age, it was believed that the Christ, when he came, would rule from Jerusalem on the throne of David, that he would be crowned king in this very Temple, and that all people of all nations would be coming to here to worship the Lord God of Israel. To the Jews the Temple was the solid center of their world.

So you can well imagine how shocked and horrified the disciples were when, after one of them commented to Jesus about the grand scale and wonder of the place, he told them that in the near future not one stone of it would be left atop another. It was unthinkable to the disciples. What Jesus said would have shaken them to the core; which is why, a bit later when they were sitting opposite the Temple on the Mount of Olives, four of them privately asked him to elaborate. Still reeling, dazed and confused about what he'd said, they implored him, "Tell us more. When will these things happen? And what signs will tip us off so that we'll know they're about to take place."

What Jesus said next was even more upsetting to the disciples. The future he described to them was anything but what they had been taught to expect. They imagined a world of peace and prosperity under the Messiah's benevolent and universal rule. There would be no wars, no conflicts of any kind; crime would be eliminated, and even the earth itself would be free of its curse. No more storms, droughts, famines, or epidemics. Destructive insects and weeds and thorns would no longer be the bane of those who worked the soil. And those closest to the Messiah – that would be themselves, the disciples, of course – would be on the top of the whole heap of humanity. They, more than anyone, believed that they would be enjoying the blessings of the messianic kingdom. *That's* what they were expecting.

Everything Jesus says to them is exactly the opposite. He describes confusion, mayhem, ongoing conflicts and controversies; false messiahs arising and leading people astray. Instead of peace and prosperity, he speaks of war and bloodshed and famine and natural disaster. Worst of all, it surely would have seemed to them, instead of enjoying being on top of it all in positions of honor and power, Jesus tells the disciples that they more than anyone would be rejected and beaten and hated and put to death for their witness to him. Even their own family members would become their enemies. It was a complete reversal. They were expecting smooth and easy sailing; nothing but sunny skies and calm seas. Jesus told them, "Gentlemen, you're heading into a

hurricane.” In view of all this, he told them to hold fast. “Hang on to what I’ve taught you. Trust and hope and believe in me; for he who endures to the end will be saved.”

With the hindsight of history, we know that what Jesus forecast was exactly what happened. Instead of the nations coming to Jerusalem to worship, Christ sent his Gospel by the Apostles to the nations. Wherever they spread the good news of Jesus, some received it with joy, and there the Christian Church took root and grew. There, in all those congregations scattered throughout the world, the Lord God made his dwelling with men. But not everyone heard the message with joy. Even more in number were those who opposed it – often with violence. The early Christians suffered terrible persecutions: they were beaten, imprisoned, exiled, some were crucified, and others were made to face lions and other unspeakable horrors merely for the entertainment of those who wanted to see the new faith stamped out. And that was just what the Church faced from the outside. Even more dangerous and destructive to the faithful were the problems the Church faced from within. The false Christs Jesus spoke of, and other teachers of lies and heresies arose from the inside. They claimed to be champions of the Gospel; but were instead destroying it by undermining and obscuring basic truths upon which the Gospel hangs. With such false teachings they did more than betray their followers to death; they led them straight to hell. So the faithful were continually under pressure, struggling just to stay alive while they tried to be salt and light in the world to lead others to Christ, and at the same time constantly battling to keep pure the truth of the Gospel within the Church. They learned through painful trials that Christ’s kingdom on this earth remains always under the cross of his suffering. They learned through the storms of conflict they faced to hold fast to the truth. And those who did hold fast to the end have already received their crowns of life in glory.

These things we know. We know that the Christian Church was built on the blood of martyrs and the truths the Apostles and early fathers fought so hard to retain. And yet ... and yet it seems to me that most of us today think that all that’s over now. Christianity has earned a place of respect in the world. No one’s going to throw us to the lions anymore. All the battles over doctrine have been fought and won. We no longer have to concern ourselves about such things. We can take it easy. The peace and stability the disciples longed for has been achieved. We can journey through this world in tranquility. That’s the way we like it. And we want things to stay this way. So we have to be careful not to rock the boat. We need to avoid conflict. With respect to the world at large that means we should keep our heads down; sort of circle the wagons and keep our Christian faith to ourselves. And if there’s a conflict of some kind with the culture in which we live or the morality of the age, we can make compromises. There’s no need to be dogmatic about anything. We can bend. And should there arise among us different teachings or new understandings about the truths of Christ ... well, it’s best not to investigate them too thoroughly. Let’s not ask any questions because that may lead to arguments and division. Instead, let’s just focus on what little we can all agree on and leave it at that. The other stuff is probably not important anyway. Hey, we’re in the comfort zone. Let’s keep it that way.

When we in the Church of Christ say or even think such things, it is sweet music in the ears of our adversary the devil. Why? Because those who think this way *are not holding fast*. They’re ready to be knocked overboard by the tiniest disturbance. They hang like ripe fruit from weak stems just waiting to drop off into the clutches of Satan.

I especially like that analogy. Some time back they ran some experiments with a number of people in an entirely closed ecosystem called Biosphere II. As I recall, it had something to do with figuring out what it would take to put people permanently into orbit in satellite cities. The idea was that such satellites would have to be completely self sustaining. They couldn’t be relying on shipments of anything from the earth: no food, water, air, nothing. Everything they needed would have to be raised and processed and recycled over and over again up there in space. So they

tried to create a closed ecosystem with the same limitations right here on the earth. They sealed up half a dozen people or so in what was sort of a microcosm of the world. Think of it as a large terrarium for human beings – the difference being that nothing was allowed in or out once the thing was sealed up. They used solar power, just like they would in space. They recycled all their water. They had a big greenhouse in which to grow their food and so that the plants could make the oxygen they'd need – they didn't even let in air from the outside. It seems that they had it all figured out.

But they ran into a major glitch. They had quite a variety of fruit trees in their greenhouse garden – trees that they were counting on for food. The trouble was that none of the fruit would ripen. It would get to about eighty percent of its ripe weight and then, still quite green and inedible, drop off the trees. It was a mystery; but they finally figured it out. The trouble was that there was no wind in the greenhouse. It turns out that without the wind blowing the fruit this way and that and placing stress on the stems that they never developed the strength they needed to support the ripe fruit. They solved the problem by putting huge fans in the greenhouse to simulate the affect of the wind. But the point is that the fruit needed the stress of the wind in order to hold fast to the tree until it was ripe.

Something similar is true in order for Christians to develop and mature properly. This is why Jesus says in today's Gospel that not only are wars and natural disasters and persecutions from outside the church *going to* come, and not only are false christs and teachers of lies within the church *going to arise* spreading confusion and conflict in their wakes, he says *that these things must be so*. It's what we call a theological imperative. It's *necessary* for the survival and growth of the Church – which on the surface might not make a lot of sense.

Taking the latter first, one may ask, "But how can people being led astray by false christs be necessary? Surely that can't be what the Lord wants." That much is true. The Lord doesn't want people to be led astray. But it's also true that without false teachers doing their destructive work even more people – maybe everybody – would be lost. How's that? Well, think of it like trying to keep your house clean. You can't just clean it once and never be troubled with it again, can you? I mean, while you're vacuuming one room, somebody's tracking dirt through another. The dust is always settling. Spiders are spinning webs in dark corners. Dead flies and those stupid Asian beetles are always piling up around the windows. The dishes in the kitchen are always being used. Even while you're doing the laundry, the clothes you're wearing are getting dirty. It's a never ending job. So it is also a never ending job to keep the Church's teaching and each individual Christian's understanding of it pure. You can't just learn it once and be done with it. Because of our sinful natures, the rooms in our spiritual houses that we're not actively working on to clean are getting dirty. False teachers show us where the trouble areas are. They and their teachings are the muddy footprints on the carpet, the dirty dishes stacked in the kitchen sink, and the plugged toilet that's dumping raw sewage on the floor. They tell us where we need to go to work right away so that we get back into the Word of God to rediscover his truth about the issues in question. You see, without the false teachers and their lies, we'd all become lazy and lethargic spiritual housekeepers. The house would grow filthier over time – until it got so bad it became completely uninhabitable by a child of God.

And the thing about false doctrine is that it keeps changing and being updated. We have to stay in the Word in order to keep up with it so that we're able to identify and resist it when we see it. If you'll allow me to change the analogy, as many of you know, I spent two years on loan serving in the Brazilian army. They're a great and proud people; I had a wonderful time there. The trouble with their Army, though, is that it hasn't fought in a war since WWII. So that's where their thinking about how to fight a war remains stuck. In their training and the weapon systems they have, they are preparing to fight a WWII all over again – which might work okay against

neighboring Paraguay (which hasn't fought a war since the time of our Civil War); but it would be disastrous against a modern, well equipped force. So here's the point: by means of false teachers and their ever changing new doctrines, Satan keeps updating his weapons systems to lead the unwary astray. But knowing this forces the faithful back into the Word to weigh and evaluate new teachings in light of what God has said and what the Church has always confessed. So false teachers, as destructive as they can be, are always inadvertently sending the faithful back into the Word, and thus closer to Christ; so their grip on the saving truth is strengthened.

But what about that other stuff: the wars, natural disasters, and the persecutions the Church faces from the outside. Why do we need those? There are several reasons. One is that they are a constant reminder to us that this world in its present form is both under a curse and destined to pass away. We have no permanent home here, and so we ought to set our hope on our home above with Christ in glory. That's where we will find the peace, security, and permanence we seek. A second reason is that such trials and hardships draw us closer to Christ and his Word in much the same way that the false teachers do. We're more likely to seek the comfort of God's Word when the chips are down. That's when faith needs strengthening: when the winds of hardship and sorrow are blowing. A third reason is that such trials prove and purify true faith. You think about the parable Jesus told of the seeds that fell on different soils. Among them was the seed that fell on rocky soil where everything was good at first. It grew just fine for a while; but as soon as the sun got hot the plant withered and died because its root was so shallow. So it is with us. A lot of the faith we think we have, isn't faith at all. Hardships prove the difference. And a fourth reason we could name is that the problems of this world give us opportunity to show the love of Christ in action – to each other, as brothers and sisters in the faith, as we support and help each other in times of need, and also to those outside the Church.

And that leads to my fifth and final reason that it is good for us in the Church that we have to face hardship and persecution for the sake of Christ's name. It gives us opportunity to witness boldly to the world about Jesus and what he has done for us. You can be sure of this: just about everyone out there is looking for something to hold on to in this decaying world of ours. They want something they can believe in. They want something they can trust – something that's permanent, stable, and always true. What they want can only be found in Jesus Christ and the forgiveness and life he gives. The trouble is that most of them don't know it, or maybe they've heard it and have rejected it. But the way we conduct ourselves especially in times of conflict and trouble and persecution, the quiet confidence we display, the implicit trust we have that the Lord is with us and will see us through every difficulty, and the words we speak when asked to give the reason for the hope that we have within us – for we know that at such times it is the Holy Spirit who is speaking through us ... well, there's no way to overstate the power and potential to change hearts of such a witness to Christ. By holding fast to Jesus at such times, we can help others to do the same.

So in summary, in the wisdom of God, while we are on this earth, we in the Church will face trials and conflicts. They are necessary and are helping to serve the ultimate good of ourselves and our neighbors. And we should expect if not actually welcome them because by them our gracious Father is preserving, purifying, and maturing us in saving faith in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore in the face of such hardships, let us hold fast to him and his Word that we too may wear crowns in glory with those who endured until the end and were saved. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!