

Year C Proper 33 These stones will all be thrown down Luke 21 vv5 to 19

You are walking out of church and you say to the person beside you, "Isn't this a lovely building?" and the person responds to you by saying, "This will one day all be a heap of rubble...you won't even be able to tell it used to be a church." How shocking and distressing. The time, the energy, the money, the beauty...all come to naught. It's horrible to think of. And yet, that is exactly what the disciples heard as they exited their beautiful temple. Jesus says to them, "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."

The temple the disciples were looking at was huge and beautiful...still gleaming with newness having been completed only about 30 years earlier, after 46 years of construction. The temple was the centre of their existence – the focal point of their religious life, the dwelling place of God's Holy Name. And now they were being told that this architectural beauty, this holiest of holy places, was going to be utterly destroyed. What a tough pill to swallow.

We all have "temples" of some sort in our lives – things we have built up, put time and energy into, things that we are proud of. Maybe it's our family, maybe it was a job we really enjoyed and worked hard at; maybe it was a business, a building project, or maybe it's this church. We all have temples and the thing about human temples is that they never stay the same. Our temples always change, they often even "fall" in some way that causes us distress...Strife in the home when family members don't talk to each other for years. The much-loved car that finally gives up the ghost. The home that seems to need more repairs than we have the time or money to take care of. The church that isn't full to the rafters anymore.

Jesus knew the temple would fall. It would one day be completely demolished and that day would be horrible. The destruction of the temple would feel like a gut-punch to the Jewish people. All of our worldly temples will eventually fall.

But Jesus also knew that the fall of the temple would not be the end. Judaism did not come screeching to a halt when the temple was demolished and neither did the new sect of Judaism that we now call Christianity. It was not the end. Why not?

By the end of today's gospel, Jesus gives us the answer... "Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." The end of the temple was not the end of God's creation. The end of the temple was not the end of God's plan for salvation. We hear in Isaiah that God is going to create a new heaven and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered. Jerusalem will be a joy, its people a delight. God only destroys the broken. God only removes the tainted. And a dark hole is not left in its wake. It is replaced with the beauty of perfection...lives free of sickness and sorrow...lives of peace and equality where the lion will lay down with the lamb. All creatures – even humans – will live in perfect harmony. This is something incredibly hope-giving in a time when wars continue all over the globe and have, for the first time in a long time, reared its ugly head in a first-world country – Ukraine – which brings war close to home as we have just dedicated a day to remembering all those who fought, all those who died in war. All that we hear in Isaiah about an end to our destructive human ways, ways based on greed and the lust for power and control, the end of these things is very important for us to have in our minds as we hear Jesus speak of destruction and fighting because Jesus does not speak of the end of *all* things.

God's message of perfect peace and equality does not sit well in the minds of many – then and now. The people in power want to keep their power. There is in humanity the desire for more than our neighbour, the need to be as good or better than our neighbour, the thinking that if we have more money, more property, more stuff than our neighbour that means that we are also better than our neighbour. There is some darkness in every human heart and, for those in whom the darkness prevails, there will be no everlasting life in God's kingdom. But don't let that lead you to think that you are doomed. In the book of God's revelation to John we hear, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev.19:9?). Everyone is invited. We are, each one of us, invited. Jesus tells us today that the Holy Spirit – dwelling within every one of us – will be our help to endure the brokenness of this world. God does not show us our destruction. God shows us our redemption. Only those who refuse God's invitation – which is given over and over and over again – will be those who perish.

Jesus later said to his disciples that when the temple was destroyed, he would build it up again in three days. That statement was a puzzle to his disciples until they realized, like we now know, Jesus was talking about the temple of himself, his body, his very identity.

When the Christian Church gathers here together, we touch something greater than the building. We tend to think of churches and the things in them as being "holy", somehow "sacred". We tend to think of the church building as the "House of God". God is here but God is here because we are here. God is here because God is everywhere. When we consecrate a church, we don't somehow contain God in our building. It doesn't mean that our building is holy while the world outside is not holy. In reality, all things are holy. All things are holy because all things come of

God. "All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee." When we name a thing as "holy," we mean that we have dedicated it to God's use. We are a holy people, a royal priesthood because, through our baptism, we have dedicated our lives to God's use.

This is why when we gather, we touch something greater than the building.

Through Jesus' humanity, he has redeemed our humanity – Jesus made it possible for us to be in relationship with God. We touch something greater because we touch Jesus Christ himself. Jesus is God's temple – the dwelling place of God – and he gave us that gift as well. God dwells within us and we are now the body of Christ here on earth. Peter writes that we are living stones, being built into a spiritual house for God (1 Peter 2:5). The temples we have built in our lives will change; they may fall...but our spiritual stones remain.

We are holy. We are dedicated to God's use. The stones around us are important. Our human temples are important. But they are important only because of their use by us, the living stones. This temple brings us together to celebrate and strengthen our relationship with God. Here, we strengthen our relationships with each other. We strengthen our relationship with God's creation. All of our temples that we build – our families, our jobs, our projects, everything – are holy when they are dedicated to God's use. We can be proud of our things and our accomplishments but we must keep them holy – dedicated to God's use.

Dedicated to God's use...Not our use...God's use. We strive to hear God's voice, to learn God's will, to align our desires with God's desires so that we are working with God instead of against.

Jesus knew that losing the temple would be difficult. But God had foretold change through Isaiah long before and Jesus knew that change and newness were live-giving and hope-bringing. We heard God say through Isaiah this morning, “But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.” But change and newness is also disconcerting, even frightening, for people. We do like some new stuff in the church – new paint, new hymns now and then. But the bigger the change, the bigger the fear. Changes are threatening. “As Bishop John Taylor pointed out in the 1980s, the Church, intended to be a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led community, has a strong tendency to settle into a framework of structures and procedures and then develop self-protective mechanisms for survival” (p.47 of Steve Aisthorpe’s *Rewilding the Church*). We do this because change and newness is frightening. Neuroscientists know that fear and excitement are exactly the same in terms of brain chemistry (Aisthorpe, 11-12). So, even the excitement of change is still experienced as fear – change is experienced as a loss before it is experienced as a gain. We worry that if we change things, we’ll make things worse. Leave well enough alone, we may say. But “well enough” is not good enough in God’s kingdom.

The church was born of change. It was born of Jewish people who changed their thinking and accepted new ideas of what the messiah would be like and would do to bring God’s kingdom. It was born of Jewish people who changed their thinking and accepted gentile people who had not first converted to Judaism. As I’ve mentioned before, in the beginning, Christians were forbidden to kneel on Sundays because kneeling was not an appropriate posture for rejoicing in God’s kingdom. We change and move away from our roots and then, when we try to move back again, we meet resistance because it is not what people know now. We were born of change and continue to change. [Saying you want your church to grow but not

change is like saying you want to lose weight but then you eat a bacon cheeseburger.] Change is a necessary part of growth. Renewal and growth require change and so we must coax the Church into renewal.

Since the Church is the people, if we desire hope-giving, live-giving change and newness we must be serious and focused on the necessary change and newness within ourselves – each stone is a part of the building. We must coax ourselves into renewal. Being a living stone of the temple is a different way of saying that each one of us is a disciple of Christ – a follower of Christ. Church development expert, Steve Aisthorpe describes discipleship like this:

Discipleship, the act of being a disciple, ...is in fact intensely relational, continuous and all-encompassing. How could it be anything other than relational? While the teachings of Jesus provide the richest source of truth and wisdom, the one we follow is not an idea to be contemplated or a hypothesis to be proved. While his power to create and to restore is beyond imagining, he is not a force to invoke or harness. 'God reveals himself in personal relationship...' (Eugene Peterson) It is in the context of this relationship and as we nurture that relationship that, gradually but resolutely, often imperceptibly but occasionally dramatically, a Christ-ward transformation occurs. It is a life-long undertaking and a daily discipline. It is a whole-of-life reorientation of life. It is an all-embracing, all-inclusive, all-pervading process of rehabilitation. (Aisthorpe, p.57-58).

Let me say that last bit again: *[Discipleship] is a life-long undertaking and a daily discipline. It is a whole-of-life reorientation of life. It is an all-embracing, all-inclusive, all-pervading process of rehabilitation.* Talk about requiring change. I would guess that, for many, this description of discipleship does not match how you would describe your life of discipleship right now. It is definitely a life that we

must *work* toward attaining. As Advent approaches, this is the ideal time to step up this work of a whole-hearted turning of our entire lives...with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with our mind, and with all our strength. This is the first and great commandment (p.69 of the BCP). Many of us grew up saying these words every Sunday but how do we do this? We rightly talk about loving others – that’s the second commandment of course – and reaching out into our communities, helping those in need, giving, giving, giving....But, to return to the image of being living stones of a living temple, in order to continuously reach out to others, in order to be a strong community, we must be strong individually – a house built on rock rather than on sand. To do this we must cultivate our individual inner life. Christian community and solitary devotion “must grow together; one is a source of thriving for the other” (Aisthorpe, p.80-81). The Angus Reid Institute reports that 1 in 5 Canadians prays each day. That might sound okay but, as I said earlier, “Well enough is not good enough in God’s kingdom.” One third of Canadians never pray at all ([Prayer: Alive and well in Canada - Angus Reid Institute](#)). In another Angus Reid study in 2013, they report that the majority of Canadians, even those who identify as Christians, “seldom or never” read the Bible. Despite the fact that 67% of Canadians (2011) say they are Christian, only 14% of Canadians read the Bible at least once per month. *Once per month!* ([Most Canadian Christians never read the Bible - The Canadian Lutheran](#)). We cannot be passionate about the word of God if we do not know the word of God. We cannot have a strong relationship with God if we do not spend time in relationship with God. Put together, these statistics go a long way to explain why a lot of people have misconceptions or flat-out wrong ideas about God and Christianity. The decline in time spent in prayer and the decline in time spent reading scripture mirrors the decline in church attendance ([Most Canadian](#)

[Christians never read the Bible - The Canadian Lutheran](#)). We can do something about this and we can start with ourselves this Advent. As we learned during our Parish Discernment Evening – and on the back of the bulletin for those who could not be there – the first and foundational mark of Jesus’ life and the life of a healthy church is being “energized by faith” – experiencing God’s love in worship together, desiring to serve God and one another, engaging with Scripture, and nurturing our faith in Christ (p.19 of Healthy Churches’ Handbook). Experiencing God’s love in worship together and desiring to serve God and one another are things, I believe, we already do quite well. This Advent, I hope that we will together work to engage more with Scripture and nurture our faith.

Being energized by faith, we will be more able, with Isaiah, to “Rejoice and be glad forever in what [God is] creating, embracing rather than resisting the necessary change found within God’s purpose.

"As for these things that you see," Jesus tells us, "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." But, not a hair of our heads will perish. By our endurance we will gain our souls. We, the living stones, for more than 2000 years have built a spiritual house for God and we, the living stones, will continue to build.