

Year C Proper 33 Trust in God Gain Your Soul Luke 21 v5 to 19

The Temple was beautiful...huge gleaming white marble stones, gold-plated doors... King Herod had spared no expense when he rebuilt the Temple. It was designed to be a testament to *his* glory and power. For the Jewish people, though, it was the place where heaven and earth were joined together by the presence of God among them. The Temple was a massive structure – a testament to the accomplishment of human engineering – and it held strong emotional and spiritual significance for society. Jesus hears people talking about how wonderful it is and says it will be completely, utterly destroyed. Not one stone will be left on another. What a stunning declaration out of nowhere. But, notice, the disciples didn't question *if* this would happen. They wanted to know *when* it would happen. They had such confidence in Jesus as teacher, preacher, healer, unifier sent from God that they didn't question his statement that the massive structure, newly completed, holding – apparently – 400 000 people in its outer court alone, would be reduced to rubble. “When will it happen and how will we know when it's about to happen?” is what they ask.

Now, when Luke wrote his account of Jesus' life and activity, the Temple had already been destroyed. So, Jesus' answer that we hear isn't so much about predicting the Temple's destruction at a particular time. It's about giving its destruction – which has already happened in the experience of the Gospel audience – it's about giving its destruction *meaning*, providing the “why” in the lives of the people hearing this story, giving them hope for the future and strength for the present. This is exactly what Jesus' answer does for us as well in our troubling times so let's explore his answer.

Jesus begins by telling us that many people will come in his name proclaiming things that we are simply not to believe. He lists two things in particular – people claiming to be the Messiah and people saying they know when the Day of the Lord will happen. Don't fall for it, Jesus says. Anyone providing a timeline for God is not to be followed, says Jesus. As for those who say they are the Messiah, I think when Jesus physically appears once more among us, I believe we'll know for sure.

Jesus then lists for us some troubling things that will occur in between then and the time when God's kingdom will arrive in all its fulness on earth as in heaven. He names wars and insurrections, earthquakes and famines, persecution, and family strife. People and planet alike will be in turmoil as God's kingdom establishes itself. Why is that? It is important to notice that, throughout scripture, the strife and persecutions were already happening. Jesus' own family thought he was crazy and wanted him to go home with them and keep quiet. The prophets were often tortured, ridiculed, killed. The prophets, and Jesus, were proclaiming the same message – a message of God's purpose right from the very beginning. The message they were proclaiming was about the coming fulness of God's kingdom – the message that we always label as "Good News" – and it was not welcomed by the people in power. The people in charge – those given power according to the world's idea of power – and the people benefitting from the way the world works now, do not want God's kingdom to come. They do not want to hear that message because that message is telling them things like: sell all you have and give it to the poor; welcome the dirty and the smelly and the leprous to your dinner table; give up your social status and share the kiss of peace with your poor neighbour in the hut down the road; wash the feet of the slave who used to serve you dinner when you got home from work.

At opposite ends of the bible, we have the same warning of the reaction of unwelcome to our Good News. Prophets like Amos point out the unfaithfulness, of the people, to God's ways: "you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate" he says, you should not be longing for the day of the Lord (Amos 5 for example). This day was longed for by the Jewish people as the time when Israel would be restored to greatness and life would be wonderful but it was also to be the time of reckoning for those who say they follow God's ways but don't. Being labeled as a child of Abraham was not going to protect you if your heart wasn't true to God's ways.

At the other end of the bible, in God's Revelation to John, we hear of God's overthrow of all worldly power that glorified the accumulation of wealth and social status, leading to the wealth of a few and the poverty of many, exclusion, oppression, discrimination. We hear of its overthrow and discover that the leaders of the nations, and the merchants who gained wealth because of this system weep and mourn its loss. "Alas," they cry. "This wealth has been laid waste." All who gained wealth from the world's ways of power throw dust on their heads and cry in despair. The leaders of the world are intoxicated by worldly power and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury we are told (Rev.18; Rev.19) and they do not want God's kingdom to come along and take this away from them.

I used to wonder who would be foolish enough to turn down God and God's kingdom but I understand now that people with power are very reluctant to let go of that power. It's tempting to think of only the very wealthy as having power and being reluctant to give up such things as their huge yachts and \$1000 bottles of

champagne in order to welcome the fullness of God's kingdom. But, in actuality, power imbalances exist at every level of society and in every context. Some of us gathered here are more powerful than others gathered here – in different ways for different reasons. Each one of us must think on the worldly power that we hold and decide if we are capable and willing to give it up – to lose our lives for the sake of the Good News. Here in God's kingdom, we are meant to be equals in every way. God pleads with his people, with us, to “come out” of the corrupt and broken ways of worldly power, to free ourselves from its very attractive but deceptive promise of the good life.

That's not easy. How do we live less and less enmeshed in the brokenness of the world's systems while still living in the world? As we discern together how to do this, as we learn more deeply and understand more fully God and God's ways and try to walk in them – as we pray each week – there will be others around us that may find us foolish or even offensive. To live according to God's ways is to throw a wrench into the workings of the world, to turn the world upside-down as Luke says in Acts. Working with God to bring about the fulness of God's kingdom – fighting for God's love, peace, and justice in the world – will oftentimes mean “upsetting the apple cart”, as the saying goes.

But, when people wonder what we're doing and why we're doing it – whether that curiosity is negative or positive – it is always the opportunity, as Jesus says, to testify...to tell people about the complete equality found in God's kingdom, to show people the boundless generosity and inclusive love found in God's kingdom, and to invite them to “come and see”, to find out for themselves what life in God's kingdom is all about.

Jesus knows he is laying a tough task on us. It is not easy to untangle ourselves from the systems that are woven into our way of life. It's not easy to be different from others around us. And many people would rather talk to a total stranger about God than to bring up the subject with their family. It's not easy but Jesus assures us that it *is* possible when we trust in our relationship with God who loves us and guides us. When Jesus says, "I will give you words and wisdom" he reminds us of the intimate nature of that relationship because God dwells within us. "Not a hair on your head will perish" Jesus assures us. It may feel tough – this untangling and inviting and testifying we've been asked to do – but we're not being asked to do the impossible. It reminds me of Bishop Victoria's experience when she'd been asked to let her name stand to become the first female bishop in Canada. She struggled with the decision and cried out to God, "This is a hard thing you've asked me to do, you know" and Jesus, nailed to the cross, looked down at her and said, "Really?"

The fullness of God's kingdom is coming and we've been asked to share in the awesome privilege and responsibility. As we heard last week, "Work, for I am with you," God tells us. Sure, it's tough *but* we do it together *and* it's worth it...for you will gain your souls.