

PROMISE AND ENDURANCE

Malachi 4. 1-2a

2 Thessalonians 3. 6-13

Luke 21. 5-19

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In his last few days in Jerusalem, before his arrest and execution, our Lord said some very controversial things, and among them were his comments about the great temple that dominated the city's skyline. He says to his disciples, 'as for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be torn down.' He is warning them that Jerusalem was heading for disaster; and that the great building of the temple was ear-marked for obliteration.

Sadly, it was a warning that was unlikely to be heeded, for the temple was considered to be indestructible. For a start, there was its sheer size. If you stand today at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (which is all that remains of the temple), you can count 24 rows of stones rising up to a height of 75 feet above you. Some of the stones weigh one hundred tonnes each. Those 24 rows of stones rest, however, on another 19 rows of stones that lie beneath the ground. Such foundations were necessary for the entire original edifice which towered above; and what a sight it was. The Jewish historian Josephus said that the outer structure of the temple was covered with gold plates, so that when the sun came up 'it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays.' And Josephus tells us that there was so much white marble that 'the temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow.'

But there were other reasons for thinking that this temple was indestructible. It was, after all, a sacred place; a holy place. It was believed to be the very centre and axis

of the whole world, and it was the dwelling place of Israel's God, the God of all the earth. How could it ever be destroyed? On the contrary, God would destroy anyone who dared to strike at this holy place. If the Romans attacked it, they would be defeated. There was a whole ideology and way of life that was based on the temple in Jerusalem. Israel's very identity and security were carved into this building.

All this is destined for destruction and for rubble, said Jesus. And so it was to be. When you want to inflict damage upon a nation, you choose very carefully which buildings you are going to attack. The 9/11 bombers chose predominant symbols of American power and identity for their act of vengeance; and when the Romans squashed a Jewish revolt some 40 years after Christ's words of warning, it is no surprise that they quickly turned their attention to the temple. It was crushed and ransacked; those mighty walls were demolished; and the menorah, the great seven-branched candle-stand that adorned the temple's interior was seized, taken away and paraded as a trophy.

Can you imagine what a trauma that was for the Jewish people? How could God allow this to happen? Indeed, where was God in it all? Did God lie dead in the rubble and the ruins of his house?

Well, there were some who would have interpreted this calamity in a more positive light. There were, after all, certain passages of the Scriptures which suggested that any attack on Jerusalem would trigger God's final intervention in the world on behalf of Israel. The Day of the Lord would come; and then a new creation would begin. There is always the hope that out of death and disaster, something new will emerge.

This is the perspective that is given to us, for example, in our appointed Old Testament text from Malachi: 'See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble, the day that comes will burn

them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root or branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.'

If our Lord's disciples entertained hopes that the destruction of the temple would lead to a new beginning or a new creation, Jesus soon squashed them. He speaks of wars and rumour of war; of earthquakes and famines and plagues; and of persecutions for God's people. In other words, things will go on much the same, as they have done; and the tortuous convulsions of human history will not cease.

That is a salutary lesson for us on Remembrance Sunday. In light of Christ's predictions of war and rumours of war, we should not be surprised that the list of the fallen gets longer and longer each year. And there are some parallels between the destruction of the temple and the First World War, which with other wars we remember in on our hearts and in our minds today. Year after year, we are reminded of that terrible slaughter which, in the words of Wilfred Owen, 'slew half the seed of Europe'. Many of the same questions that accompanied the destruction of the temple accompanied the First World War, and indeed every war. Where is God in all of this? Just as the great temple collapsed, and the very dwelling-place of God was reduced to rubble, so too did the whole of European civilisation seem to be annihilated in the First World War; and again in the Second World War.

In light of these tragic events, we are led to ask ourselves a question. Where is the gospel in this situation? Where is the good news? Do we face just the prospect of more and more of the same, more wars and rumours of war, and just some distant hope that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth? What does the gospel offer us now? What does it promise us? What will give us hope here and now in the struggles and traumas of life, as we face our own crushing experiences of loss and collapse?

There is actually something quite beautiful in our gospel passage. After having spoken of hundred-tonne stones being overthrown and of great global upheavals such as wars, plagues and earthquakes, our Lord turns his attention to something tiny and hardly visible. He says, 'but not a hair of your head will perish'. Jesus has just told his disciples that some of them would even be put to death; and we know that this indeed occurred in the lives of Stephen and James, the son of Zebedee. Nevertheless, Christ provides assurance about the love and protection that God will give those who follow his Son. The disciples have been purposefully warned about forthcoming trials, so that they may be prepared to endure them faithfully. And our Lord then promises his disciples that 'by your endurance, you will gain your souls'. God will not abandon his own in times of difficulty and persecution; and he calls us to trust him.

In a world where evil, darkness, violence seem never to come to an end, we Christians are called to be patient; to hang on in the worst of circumstances; to endure. Christian endurance is not only defiant against evil; it is resilient; and it is hopeful. Christian endurance is not simply waiting; it is perseverance.

Julian of Norwich, a 14th-century mystic and theologian, wrote a book called *Revelations of Divine Love*; and in it, she recounts how Jesus appeared to her and spoke the words, 'You will not be overcome'. She wrote, 'This word, "you will not be overcome", was said very distinctly and firmly to give us confidence and comfort for whatever trouble may come. He did not say, "you will never have a rough passage, you will never be overstrained, you will never feel uncomfortable", but "you will not be overcome"'. And Julian then concludes, 'God wants us to pay attention to these words, so as to trust him always with strong confidence through thick and thin. For he loves us, and delights in us...So all will be well.'

We Christians cannot value life itself more than following Christ. Yes, our discipleship will surely require endurance; but the promise is that as we are faithful to him and as we continue to follow him, we will gain our very lives.

Amen.