

WHAT (OR WHO) IS THE SOURCE OF OUR HOPE?

Daniel 12. 1-3

Hebrews 10. 11-14, 19-25

Mark 13. 1-8

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

Those of you who have travelled to the Holy Land and who have been to Jerusalem will no doubt have had the occasion to visit what is called the Wailing Wall, where many Orthodox Jews still come to pray every day. What is known as the ‘Wailing’ or Western Wall is in fact just a portion of the outer western wall of the Second Jewish Temple that King Herod started to build in Jerusalem¹ some 20 years before Christ’s birth, and which was only finished more than eighty years later.²

The Temple – or should I say, the Temple District – in Jerusalem was an amazing and impressive place. The space reserved for the Temple and its associated buildings was roughly in the form of a square, each side being approximately 600 feet long.

The temple area was divided into courts, and the outer courts stood on the lowest ground. Ascents up the Temple mount were made possible by steps leading from the court of the Gentiles to the court of the women, and then from the courts of the men of Israel to those of the priests, and finally to the Temple itself. The Temple, with its porch facing the east and its Holy of Holies facing the west, was erected on the same site where the first Temple of Solomon had stood. It was thus visible from every part of the city. The Temple area was surrounded on all sides by a high wall, around which cloisters were placed.

¹ Herod’s ‘Second’ Temple was actually a large-scale renovation of Zerubbabel’s Second Temple.

² Cf. Jn 2. 20. The Second Temple was actually completed in CE 64, just six years before it was destroyed by the Roman army of Titus. A temple to Jupiter Capitolinus was then erected on the same site.

In front of the Temple itself was a remarkable gateway without doors, with lintels above, adorned with coloured and embroidered curtains. It was covered with gold, and a golden vine was spread upon it. It is through this gateway that priests passed to come to the Holy Place; and from there, the High Priest passed once a year to the innermost sanctuary, the Holy of Holies. Ordinary Jews could not, of course, go through the gateway leading to the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies; but they all knew that the Temple furnishings and walls of those two rooms were either overlaid with, or were made of pure gold.

Now that this picture of the Temple is fresh in our minds, we can better understand the comment made by one of our Lord's disciples in chapter 13 of St Mark's gospel. As Jesus came out of the Temple, this disciple said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' It is not surprising that he admired the solidity and the largeness of the stones and the Temple building; some of the stones were about 40 feet long and 12 feet high. For many, the Temple was a symbol of endeavour and lasting achievement. The Temple was one of the wonders of the world. For Jesus' disciples and for others, these Temple stones were a sign of strength, permanence and endurance.

Our Lord, however, knew that these stones were not to last for ever. He knew that in less than forty years' time, in the year 70 CE to be exact, Jerusalem would fall after being under siege. He knew that over one million people would die of starvation, and that the Temple would be destroyed. He knew that the Roman armies would use fire to undermine the foundations of its walls and then tumble the huge stones down into a pile of rubble. Jesus knew that strength, permanence and endurance would not be found in this awe-inspiring, man-made Temple; and he knew that the salvation of the Jews would not be found in it either.

He then goes on to tell Peter, James, John and Andrew what to expect in the future. The disciples – and indeed the world – would know all sorts of social, political and religious turmoil; and yet these sad events were not to be mistaken for the end time.

The disciples were surprised (and probably dismayed) when they heard the prophecy of our Lord; and no doubt you and I are surprised as well. How then are we to take his words?

Well, it is all too easy to trust in things that we think will last, when only God is eternal. We have only to turn on our televisions or radios, or read a newspaper or magazine, or surf on the Internet, and suddenly we find ourselves bombarded by promises. If only we will buy L'Oréal's 'Youth Code' skin care products, we will start cracking the code to younger-acting skin; *Men's Fitness* magazine assures me that with its 8-week body plan, I will have a six pack (and I'm not talking about beer) in two months; and if any one of us is feeling stressed out, the 'Wiki-how' website advises us (amongst other things) to get a massage, drink stress-relieving teas and to 'tune into our body' regularly.

All sorts of companies, products and people are capable of leading us astray. They promise youth, fitness, peace and life; and yet the truth is that all of these are ultimately dependent upon God alone. For the moment at least, the world is in the grip of the evil one. As our Lord said, there will be wars, and rumours of wars. There will be all sorts of pain and suffering. We have seen this once again, have we not, in the horrible terrorist attacks which took place in Paris just two days ago.

But our Lord also tells us (and we will revisit this theme during Advent) that these events are only the beginning of the birth pangs of a new age, and of the new kingdom that is dawning. At times, it may seem that we are losing battle after battle; but the truth is that final victory is assured us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

You see, the coming of the kingdom of God – and God’s final victory – were inaugurated by our Lord’s life and ministry. Yet we get stuck sometimes, don’t we, because we forget that this kingdom is still dawning. When difficulties come, it is easy to lose hope, and to forget the promises of final victory that are associated with God’s kingdom.

And since the kingdom of God is a divine and transcendent entity, we cannot control it. We cannot make it ‘come’ in its fulness all by ourselves. It is entirely up to God to do so; and he will accomplish this at some point in the future. In the meantime, here and now, we can only pray for the coming of the kingdom. ‘Thy kingdom come.’ But let us do so in hope. Let us remember that when that kingdom will come in all its fulness, (to quote the words we heard from Daniel) ‘we shall shine like the brightness of the sky; (and we will shine) like the stars for ever and ever.’

As we pray and await the final coming of the kingdom, our trust and hope are not to be placed in any man-made thing. Our trust and hope are to be in God alone. As the 14th-century mystic Julian of Norwich wrote, speaking of our Lord: ‘He did not say, “You shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not travail; you shall not be distressed.” But he did say, “You shall not be overcome.”’

It is this trust and hope in God that helped Julian to understand the promise that the Lord gave her: ‘I shall make all things well. I may make all things well, and I can make all things well; and you shall see yourself that *all things shall be well.*’

No matter how dark the days, no matter how dark the circumstances, the Light of Christ is with us. We are never alone or left in the dark. Final victory is ours, and will be ours, through him who loves us. Amen.