

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE FORETOLD

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.

The temple in Jerusalem, built under Herod, was admirable for its massive dimensions and handsome style. In our appointed gospel text, one of our Lord's disciples, leaving the temple in Jerusalem with Jesus, is so impressed with the temple that he exclaims, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!'

For the past three days, Christ has been living with his disciples in Bethany (Mark 11. 1 and 11. 11), on the outskirts of Jerusalem. On the first day, he entered the city riding on a colt, and the people greeted him by spreading their garments and strewing leafy branches before him, crying: 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!' (11. 7-9). That day our Lord went into the temple, looked around, and then went back to Bethany.

On the second day, Jesus entered the temple with deliberation and cast out the buyers, sellers, money-changers and dove-merchants. In so doing, Christ became instantly notorious to the temple rulers; and the chief priests and scribes sought some way to destroy him. But they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching; and so, on this second day, our Lord left the city again in the evening to return to Bethany as a free man.

On the third day, Jesus did much teaching in and around the temple. He stood up for himself when the chief priests and scribes questioned the source of his authority. He taught the parable of the vineyard. He outfoxed an attempt to trip him up over

paying taxes to Caesar. He refuted the Sadducees who argued against the resurrection. When a scribe asked him which commandment is first of all, Christ answered with his famous summary: love God, and love your neighbour. He taught the people to beware of religious leaders who were full of pretence, and in contrast, praised the widow's offering of two copper coins, worth a mere penny, saying she had given more than anyone, for she had 'put in everything that she had' (Mark 12).

And it is at the end of this long, very full third day in the temple, when that disciple proclaims admiration for the temple edifice, that the reply of our Lord comes as a shock. Not one stone will be left here upon another. All will be thrown down.

'When will this be?' Peter, James, John and Andrew ask Jesus. And what we need to do, we who read this passage, is to note that Christ does not answer their question. He does not say when the temple will be torn down. The awesome temple, which he had entered the first day, purged in the second, and taught within with authority through the third: it is not about the time of the temple's destruction that our Lord goes on to speak. There is something else more important for his disciples to understand.

Two things, in fact. Firstly, Jesus wants to warn them against being deceived. There are going to be people who will come along after he has gone, claiming to be saviours. These are false Christs, and many will be deceived: don't be amongst them, our Lord warns his disciples.

And the second thing is about the world. There will be wars and rumours of wars...nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be earthquakes and famines and troubles; but all of these things are only beginnings. The disciples are not think that the end is at hand.

Two warnings, then: don't be deceived by someone who claims to be a new saviour, and don't think that international crises signify that the end is at hand.

It seems to me that fallen humanity has always been prey to rumours of, and panics about global catastrophe. Sometimes they appear as anticipated disasters, environmental, economic, or otherwise. Sometimes they appear as all-too-real terrorist attacks. In whatever form, the clamour is ever there: we are told that *this thing is the thing that will be the end*. Christ saw it all. He knew that there will be false messiahs who call for our allegiance, and there will indeed be awful international events. But, our Lord says, these things will not be the end. They will not be, as it were (and taking it symbolically), the destruction of the temple. We do not know when the end will come, when not one stone will be left upon another.

Remember those three days that Jesus spent in the temple? On the first day, he entered it; on the second day, he cleansed it; and on the third day, he taught within it with authority. As we think about these three days, we could say that in a sense, they symbolise the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Will you trust me and come along on a wild flight of association? Let's say that the glorious temple in Jerusalem is the pinnacle of human accomplishment. It represents the absolute best that we humans can do. Christ first comes and visits us: that's the incarnation, his entry into our world, and his taking our flesh. But the best we can do is tragically marred by sin. So for our good (and because he loves us) our Lord must purge our sins, whip them and overturn them and drive them out. He does this by taking God's wrath upon his own flesh, and by dying.

And on the third day, he takes the loving gaze of the Father for the Son and turns that gaze upon us. On the third day the Father looks *at us and sees his Son*. This is the teaching of the resurrection. We learn on the third day that Jesus is the one with

authority, that we should give God everything that is his, that indeed the dead do rise again, that the most important thing for us, as we go on living in the world, is to love God and to love one another, and that we should care about nothing except to give ourselves completely to God.

Three temple days: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection. It is the deep irony of the gospel of Mark that the disciples don't get it. They go out at the end of the third day, having received the teaching of the resurrection, and what do they say? 'What a great temple this is!' It is a mistake that we could make as well. We are quite capable of leaving this historic and important church building today and saying, 'What beautiful stones are here!' And to be seduced further by the wondrous things that surround us on this island: sea, rocks, bays, beaches, flora and fauna.

Yes, of course, we are right to be thankful for our church and for this marvellous island that initially was called Sarnia. But we are also right to remember that Christ, who was *himself the glorious temple*,¹ suffered, and that he promised that we too are likely to suffer. Yet when suffering appears, he told us, we are not think that it is the end of the world.

The end of the world will occur when our Lord comes. And those of us who want to show that we have a robust, resurrection faith are invited to say, 'Look, what a great and august Saviour we have! Look, he is the *living temple*; and he, who is risen from the dead, will assuredly come again!'

Amen.

¹ Cf. John 2. 19-22; Ephesians 2. 17-22.