

November 13th, 2022

Year C; Proper 28

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Canticle 9 The 1st Song of Isaiah

Luke 21: 5-19

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "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."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

I served in school ministry at St. Christopher's School in Richmond for 21 years and I can honestly say I was never bored for one minute of that ministry. The boys, 5-11 years old, were always refreshing, funny, and

hopeful. Many of the parents were thoughtful and kind, and a few were maddening and difficult.

Many parents saw an Episcopal school as a positive extension of their own religious life as a family, and thus were involved in our chapel services, attending often and willing to help with community service. I do remember one Dad who said to me, after a 25 minute Chapel service: "I wish church could be like this! Two verses of a hymn, a few lines of a psalm, a short reading, a story, prayers, and you're done!" I did not point out to this Dad that Chapel was designed for the attention span of a 7 year old boy, not an adult male with a degree from law school. But I appreciated his regard for Chapel, and that he too received spiritual nurturance along with his son.

However, another group of parents saw sending their children to an Episcopal school as a way to introduce their children to faith and worship, without having to actually get up on Sunday mornings themselves and go to church. So if these parents had a religious question I, the school chaplain, often was the one to receive it.

Often these parents would stop me in the front hall of school, while I was heading to teach or to pick up a boy for counseling, and ask for my thoughts on the latest apocalyptic Christian bestseller, speaking of it in excited or hushed tones.

These books often were interpreting the kind of signs in our world that Jesus speaks of in our gospel today:

"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."

The authors of these bestsellers would tell their readers the secret to understanding these signs, and then advise them how to be the ones with the insider information, and thus how to avoid the tumult, and be taken to heaven as the chosen.

I never read those best sellers, which shocked the parents that would come to me with their inquiries.

But I know the seductive quality of books like those, that take our incomplete and hurting world and promise to give THE answers.

It is so tempting to give all our energy to reading the signs, figuring out the secrets, feeling less frightened and worried in our world. And goodness knows, we can look around our world in 2022 and see so much of what Jesus speaks of: wars and insurrections, earthquakes, yes, and tsunamis to follow, not to mention floods and wildfires, and plagues, goodness knows, yes.

But in chasing the allure of being in the know, thinking we have figured out the signs, we thus, again, find ourselves divided, here as those who know, and those who do not. And then comes the inevitable temptation to look down on those who do not know, those who are in and those who are out, again putting ourselves as judge and God.

And this is not what Jesus speaks of his own disciples needing to do, as well as you and me. This passage is a Holy Week reading, and occurs not long before the Last Supper and his arrest. Jesus feels and knows the urgency of facing his own betrayal and arrest and execution. And he tries to tell his friends, and us, what it is to be a follower.

Jesus says that if we follow him, we will not be popular or triumphant or in the know. We too may be betrayed, persecuted, hated, killed.

And called to follow means we follow the one who did not leap up with a sword and slaughter his attackers, but taught God's grace and mercy and peace and forgiveness, even unto the cross.

Jesus concludes his urgent words to his friends and us:

“By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

And so, I had to tell the eager parents that came to me clutching bestsellers,

no, I did not read it, and no, I would not read it.

Instead, I would give my energy to following Jesus, within the tumult and brokenness and beauty of our world.

Last summer I was reading the newsletter from Episcopal Relief and Development. The President of ERD, Rob Radtke, wrote in his President's Column of all those things in our world that echo Jesus' words.

Radtke spoke of the war in Ukraine noting:

"We have only just begun to count the costs of the human tragedy at the heart of this devastating war." (ERD Newsletter Summer 2022)

He went on to note how the interruption of grain exports from Ukraine and Russia is now leading to potential hunger and death in Africa and the Middle East.

Wars, insurrections, plagues and famines, 2000 years ago and today.

Radtke spoke of the deep pain of our world, and offered a quote that he keeps close, from The Talmud, the ancient Jewish book of teaching and commentary. These words are based in a passage from the Book of Micah, and the quote gave me comfort and focus, and remains on my office bulletin board:

"Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

And our savior and brother concurs: *"By your endurance you will gain your souls."*

Amen.

