

Sermon for Pentecost 24 (28B)

Christ Church, Andover

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Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

It doesn't take a biblical scholar to let us know that with the words we've just heard in today's Gospel, *something* is up! Something BIG is up! In fact, you almost get the sense hearing Jesus speak to the disciples that you're listening in on a plot. And with Khalid Shaikh Mohammed in the news this past week, we might even wonder about parallels with other plots about knocking down big buildings that are a little closer to home and a little sharper in our memory.

Imagine what would happen today if a few young men, from a remote part of the country, who looked a little different because of the way they dressed, and sounded a little different because of their accent, were seen walking around Washington, DC, looking up at the monuments there – the Lincoln or Jefferson Memorials, or the Capitol Building – and someone overheard one of them saying to the others, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another. They're all coming down.”

Jesus and the disciples had come to Jerusalem, probably the first time for some of them. Jesus had been there in the Temple when he was 12 years old, but we don't know if he'd been there since. The disciples were looking up at the grandeur of the temple, admiring its enormous stone foundations, and its gleaming walls. It was quite a spectacle – something that people from all over the ancient near east came to see, Jews and Gentiles alike. It was a wonder to behold. You could see it for miles around, gleaming in the sun that shines so clear and bright in that part of the world.

The disciples were undoubtedly shocked to hear Jesus talk about the Temple being torn down. After all, it wasn't even completely finished yet. After they had walked to the other side of the Kidron Valley, they sat there with Jesus, looking across the valley at the gleaming temple from the Mount of Olives. Four of them,

Peter, James, John, and Andrew, began asking some questions privately. “Tell us when this is going to happen! What are the signs that will lead up to it?”

It was common in those days to expect the world as they knew it to come to a violent end – an apocalypse. Think of times even in our own lives when we have feared the possibility of some game-ending event for the world as we know it, like a nuclear holocaust that would send us back to the stone age, or a Y2K glitch that would bring the systems of finance and transport and distribution to a grinding halt – or a complete meltdown of the world economy that would radically change the way we live. The people of Jesus’ day had lived with prophecies of such a time, and their fears were heightened by the occupation of a foreign empire, the Romans. There were insurgents who were indeed plotting violent revolts; zealots who were willing to sacrifice themselves in the battle to free Judea from Rome. Some of them had even become disciples of Jesus. Ancient prophecies and modern politics conspired to create a heightened sense of danger and intrigue.

“Tell us when this is going to happen! What are the signs that we should look for?!” These disciples had inquiring minds: they wanted to know!

And the suspense was getting to them!

But Jesus responds in a way they did not expect. He doesn’t play to their apocalyptic imagination. He tells them, rather, not to be deceived. “Don’t believe it,” he says, “when people come, claiming to speak for me.” And “when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, *do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.*” In other words, not every terrible thing that happens is a sign that the end of the world is upon us. For as long as the systems of power and domination hold sway, you can expect that there will be wars, and disasters of all kinds. “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.” Some of these are acts of nature, and some are of human making – but don’t think that they spell the end. Instead, and here is the most important thing he says, “this is but the beginning of the *birth pangs.*” The beginning of the birth pangs.

*Birth pangs?!,* you ask. What is that all about?

Something new, he is saying, is coming to life. And all the terrible things we now endure are like the pains of childbirth. As Paul said in his letter to the church in Rome, “For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.” (Romans 8:22)

But something new is coming into being. Jesus has come to announce it. It is *the way of love*, a way that will ultimately subvert all the systems of violence and power and domination and control that govern our world – a way that is from God, and is embodied in the person of Jesus. And here, Jesus shows that he is no *ordinary* revolutionary. Most revolutions are simply variations on a theme – fighting violence with violence. Using power to overthrow power. Subjecting peoples to one form of domination rather than another.

But this would be an even more radical kind of revolution – a revolution that would put the lie to all of our business as usual, our assumptions about the way things work – yes, our cherished institutions, our cherished forms of government with their military might, and yes, even our cherished religious monuments and houses of worship.

I have to believe that all the talk (and presumably action to follow) of yet more troops in Afghanistan, with little prospect of an end to conflict in the foreseeable future, will ultimately bear witness to the ineffectiveness of war as a means of solving the underlying problems in our world. And I have to believe that the pain of our economic recession and the instability of our markets and the ongoing saga of Madoff scandals and bank bailouts and companies too big to fail, will ultimately bear witness to the unsustainability of an unbridled free-market capitalism as the best way for human beings to interact economically.

But it doesn't stop there. The finger is pointed just as ominously at religion. When Jesus spoke of the temple, and of “not one stone being left on top of another,” he spoke of religion that is unfaithful to its purpose. We heard in last week's gospel, Jesus in the temple, saying, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,

and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." (Mark 12:38-40)

And then, what did we see? We saw the example of rich people putting in large sums into the treasury, while a poor widow gave everything she had. Jesus made the point that she had indeed given more than all of them, because she had given all she had, while the rich gave out of their abundance.

But there is another point we sometimes miss, and that is the implied condemnation of a system that exploited widows and the vulnerable. We're all too familiar in our own day with religious charlatans who plead over the airwaves for the poor to send their last dollar so that they too can be blessed, so they can have a *Cadillac* in their driveway, or be *healed* of that goiter – or who knows what else!

The temple in Jesus' day had become a place where money had become more important than morality. He didn't condemn the gifts of the rich, but he did condemn a system of temple sacrifice that made some rich at the expense of the poor. In the epistle to the Hebrews that we heard from today, we see Christ as the response to this unjust system of perpetual sacrifice. Christ, through his offering of himself, *became* our sacrifice, once and for all. He not only put an end to the unjust system of temple sacrifices, but by his willing offering of himself, he turned the Roman system of domination and control on its head. Through his death and resurrection, he shone a light on the injustice and the violence of the empires of this world.

But we can't merely point the finger at the temple of Jesus' day, or at other people's religion. What about us? What about *these* stones?

There are two possibilities. These stones can represent the old that is passing away, a way of life that is ultimately self-serving, interested in what is good for me, part of a status quo that accepts as a given the systems of domination and control, and ultimately exploits the poor. They can provide a prop for our status needs and shows the world just how very pious we are, but remain disconnected from

the realities of the world around us, ultimately doing nothing to challenge the systems of this world and show a different way.

OR, these stones can serve the new thing that is coming into being – the way of love, the way that nourishes a spirit of self-giving love of neighbor, and yes, even of our enemies; where the merciful receive mercy, the meek are the ones who inherit the earth, the poor in spirit receive the kingdom of heaven, and the peacemakers are called children of God. Jesus came to change the terms of the whole discussion. It's a painful process to bring this new way of being to birth, but it is the only way that will set the world right. It's the only way, finally, that will last.

These stones deserve to stand – only to the extent that they serve that new reality as we learn what it means to live in the realm of God. If our goal in coming here is simply to feel good or to be entertained, to keep a time-honored tradition, or God forbid, to be seen by others, then our worship has been self-serving, self-indulgent, and finally idolatrous. But if in being here our hearts are lifted to God, and our minds and bodies are transformed into disciples of Jesus and to that new and living way, something wonderful has happened.

Don't be dismayed, Jesus says, when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, and earthquakes and famines. That's not the end. Don't let the doomsayers get the best of you! The new thing God is doing is still coming. I don't know if we're in the beginning, the middle, or the end of the birth pangs – but something wonderful is being born. Let it be born in us today!