

Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost (C/RCL)  
Luke 21.5-19  
November 18, 2007  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

In September we marked the six year anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. We each have unique memories of our own experiences and emotions on that day. We learned that the first and then the second World Trade Tower had been toppled; we heard that the Pentagon had been attacked, and that a plane, probably headed for Washington as well, had been flown into the ground in Pennsylvania. We didn't know if still other planes were on a deadly bee line for the Capitol or the White House or the Washington Monument or some other seat of power or architectural icon of these United States of America. What did **you** fear might be the next target for the terrorists? In the midst of the unfolding horror that day, **I** feared that the terrorists had also targeted Mr. Lincoln and that the next news flash would be that the Lincoln Memorial had been reduced to rubble.

That great president, that gentle giant who guided the Union through the Civil War, who freed the slaves against the protests of many, who humbly signed his name, "A. Lincoln," was one of the wisest, most faithful and most eloquent of all Americans:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan -- to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

I believe Mr. Lincoln's massive, kind-faced, solidly seated statue is as important as the Statue of Liberty in telling the world who we are as a nation. When I lived in Arlington and rode my bike every day to work in D.C., I passed Mr. Lincoln each morning and took a moment to say hello.... On September 11, 2001, I couldn't bare the thought his memorial might be destroyed by our enemies, as another loss on top of all the others. Thankfully it wasn't.

I don't know what the building is that is nearest and dearest to **your** heart, but the Temple was **it** for Jews of Jesus' day. By the time Jesus was standing and teaching in the Jerusalem Temple, it had been under construction for about forty years. You may remember there had been another one, built by Solomon, David's son, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians when they conquered Judah and carried the population into exile almost 600 years before Jesus lived. This was the **second** temple, then, whose destruction Jesus was predicting. It was even **more** precious for that fact.

The Temple Jesus knew was a work-in-progress, but it was already staggeringly beautiful. It was built of giant blocks of white and green marble, and adorned with all kinds of gold decorations. Parts of the outside walls were covered in gold leaf, so the Temple shone like the sun when the sun shone on it. This place wasn't just a source of national pride because of its physical beauty, though. The Temple was where God met humanity, where heaven touched earth, where sacrifices were offered to say, "Please, forgive," "Please, heal," "Please, bless." Here the people said, "Lord, have mercy," "Lord, have pity," "Lord, have patience." Here the priests offered up animals and grain, as God had commanded through Moses, enabling the people to receive forgiveness, to render praise, to give thanks. Without the Temple, there would be no place to offer the sacrifices God had commanded, practices that were at the very heart of the Law given as gift on Mt. Sinai. The Jewish people had lost their temple once, and that was their most painful national memory.

Jesus predicted the Temple would be destroyed, "not one stone... left upon another" (Luke 21.6) and He was right. About forty years after Jesus died, rose and ascended to heaven, the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, burnt the Temple and reduced it to rubble. Josephus is a famous Jewish historian who wrote about that tragedy:

The roar of the flames streaming far and wide mingled with the groans of the falling victims; and, owing to the height of the hill and the mass of the burning pile, one would have thought the whole city was ablaze... With

the cries on the hill were blended those of the multitude in the city below; and now many who were emaciated and tongue-tied from starvation, when they beheld the sanctuary on fire, gathered strength once more for lamentations and wailing.... (*War*, 6.271-275)

So – where’s the Good News? We wonder that especially when we remember that Jesus said the destruction of the Temple would not be the end. Wars, the upheaval of nations and of nature would follow. He predicted,

... before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you... You will be betrayed... and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name (Luke 21.12, 16-17).

There is a silver lining to this dark cloud, though.

This will give you an opportunity to testify [to witness to your faith in My faithfulness]... I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict (Luke 21.13, 15).

Someone whose name we don’t often hear, but who was a courageous Christian who was arrested and testified to his faith, is Eivind Berrgrav, Bishop of Oslo during World War II. Before the War, the Lutheran Church in Norway (which accounted for 97% of the population) was languishing. Many of the younger people felt the institution and its pastors had become irrelevant. That changed because of the Holy Spirit’s power routed through Bishop Berrgrav.

Berrgrav spoke out against the Quisling government which helped Nazi Germany conquer Norway, and which required Lutheran pastors to take a loyalty oath to the Fuhrer and young people to join the Hitler Youth. Berrgrav lived with such integrity and denounced Quisling with such authority that less than a tenth of the clergy took the oath; nine-tenths preferred to take the risk of resisting and went underground with their ministry. Berrgrav was placed under house arrest. A *Time Magazine* article from April 19, 1943, reported,

The four-room house, fenced by barbed wire, is constantly patrolled by eleven... storm troopers. The guard is frequently changed lest the men get on friendly terms with their prisoner, for Bishop Berggrav in confinement is as strong a moral force as all the churchmen at liberty in the land.

One of his contemporaries, Bishop Aulen of Sweden, said,

“Berggrav’s spirit has gone free through closed doors and has witnessed that God’s words bear no chains. He and Norway’s martyr church are living testimonies... that no violent power can annihilate the life borne by God’s spirit.” [same *Time* article]

When Berrgrav stood defiantly before Quisling, defending the faith and denouncing Quisling’s actions, Quisling angrily announced, “You should have your head struck off!” Berrgrav calmly answered, “Well, here I am.” (*Interpreter’s Bible, Luke*, p. 364)

Often our faith **comforts** and **strengthens** us in distressing situations, like 9/11. Then again, sometimes our faith calls us to say and do things that **create** distressing situations. The Gospel always stands on the other side of the fence from injustice. Whether it is the government or any other institution that acts unjustly, we the faithful are called to stand with the Gospel, against injustice, despite the cost to reputation, livelihood, or life itself.

Clearly, when Jesus says,

“But not a hair of your head will perish”

(Luke 21.18), He doesn’t mean we’ll come to no harm. He’s already said that some will be arrested, persecuted, put to death, for witnessing to His name and doing what His Father requires: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6.8).

What Jesus **does** mean is,

“By your endurance you will gain your souls” (Luke 21.19).

Buildings can be reduced to ruins, but God’s kingdom will prevail. As Luther wrote, “The Kingdom’s ours forever!” Be ready to stake everything on it. Jesus did. We must too.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham