

Through Jesus alone

And as [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" And Jesus began to say to them, "See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

"But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Mark 13:1-13 ESV)

The last weeks of November in the church year have traditionally peered into the future to try and perceive the ending of things, the final credits, the curtain call on the stage of life. To do that or anything spiritual or faith-related, Christians look back in time roughly 2,000 years to Jesus as the focus point for our orientation in life. Jesus himself is the culmination of God's action in rescuing us and he embodies 2,000 years or so of history which we call the Old Testament story from Abraham onwards. And so we turn to the last days of Jesus' life before his crucifixion and we find it jam-packed with action and controversy as Jesus makes things more and more clear that the old is passing away and the new has come.

He enters Jerusalem on a donkey and inaugurates a new kingdom but the old kingdom won't go down without a fight. Jesus curses the fig tree – a picture of the temple – and thus puts its practice of religion under notice – he clears the temple courtyards to begin the process. He is challenged and attacked by the religious groups – taxes to Caesar, whose wife is the lady married to seven brothers when they're in heaven? – all designed to trip him up, swing his followers against him, and highlight his 'heresies'. He attacks too – parables of tenants in vineyards and quite directly – 'hypocrites, white washed tombs'. No wonder the disciples' heads are spinning. And as they leave the temple, the disciples comment that at least the temple is grand and beautiful – with the assumption, I think, of a change of management – when Jesus is in charge and the disciples the cabinet ministers – these will be nice offices! To which Jesus harrumphs, 'Not likely – it's all coming down!'.

Remember the temple courtyard was expanded under Herod the Great – baby / toddler killing Herod – and was still being worked on and expanded. It was a large and impressive building. For Jesus to say that it would be obliterated, probably blew the disciples' minds more than anything so far. So later – and it's important to read the text and note the geography – when Jesus is now opposite the temple on the Mount of Olives looking back at it, Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask privately 'When and what will be the signs?'. I know I've mentioned this before but I think you really should try and visualise this scene. Picture the temple – picture the Mount of Olives opposite – you've gone down and up the Kidron Valley between them – picture Jesus sitting – the teaching position where he is speaking authoritatively looking at the temple across the valley – and now the question becomes where are the disciples? In front of Jesus, looking at him and therefore with their backs to the temple – or alongside Jesus looking at the same thing he is? I can't prove definitely which way it was but I very much like the former – and to me, it seems more natural – and that very thing of the disciples with their backs to the temple – to the centre of Judaism, to the place where God dwells with his people, where God blesses his people – the place that was akin to the Garden in Eden – and the disciples have their backs to it because all that action of God – creation, salvation, sacrifices, forgiveness, priesthood, blessing is now focused in Jesus.

Jesus answered the disciples' questions and how well they understood it at the time we don't know. The ones who lived past 70 AD would look back and nod and see how Jesus' words were fulfilled. And there's something with God's Word that it speaks to the current moment and since it is living and creative it keeps speaking but later generations need to be cautious to hear things correctly – that is, in the trajectory of what has happened. So the Old Testament prophecies spoke to the prophets' audience but Christians can find fulfilment in Christ. Jesus' messages to the churches in Revelation spoke to the 1st and 2nd century situation but we in the 21st century can also find truth and comfort and blessing. The danger of course is making the words today say something not in the trajectory, not in the spirit, not in context of what was originally said. So, since Jesus hasn't returned for such a long time Christians for centuries have forgotten this temple context and turned Jesus' words into signs of the end of the world – and if there's ever a business in wacky religions and cults and messianic claims – then it is about the end of things.

Today we read Jesus' words and see in them two bookends, so to speak, in which sits the 'last days'. One book end is the destruction of the temple which occurred in 70AD and the other bookend is the end of everything when Jesus returns for all the world to see and time's up. Our Gospel today talks about one bookend and next week – the last Sunday of the Church Year – it goes on to conclude with the other bookend.

Jesus' message to his disciples is clear and in summary it is this 'Don't be led astray!'. Jesus pointed to the messianic fervour of his time when oppressed people – remember that his countrymen and women were under Roman rule who franchised the local arrangements to whomever could keep order and maintain basic services – taxation, economy, and relative stability – and Jewish fervour was never far from the service. When Jesus told his disciples that many would come in his name – he's not meaning 'Jesus' but Messiah – and we know that from Jesus to the destruction of the temple there were at least five messianic claimants – including the Emperor Vespasian – who each brought together weapons, zealous fighters, and claims of better things under them but who were either tyrants or short-lived.

The followers of Jesus will become increasingly exposed as they are noticed for not being Jewish enough, for not being Roman enough, for not being loyal to the politics of the day enough and while Jesus doesn't use the term scapegoat, we can see that the first Christians were increasingly a target because the populous found them weird and different. Jesus speaks to this situation to say that through this the gospel will be proclaimed to all nations – largely in Rome – where all nations gather – and that despite the injustice and the betrayal (even family members will hand you over) and the hatred experienced, the Holy Spirit will be with you with words. Largely the words will be for others – the reason for our difference – the declaration that Jesus is Messiah and Lord – but they, too, will hear those words and they, too, will be comforted. Thus the call to endurance is made in faith to Jesus sitting down opposite the fine temple.

Calls to endurance can be hard to endure. They're not needed if we know we can endure and I think we can find them unhelpful and almost defeatist if we're really struggling. We're struggling because we're finding it hard to endure! To whom can the weak person go – who is tempted, who has fallen, who is ashamed? If the answer is 'look, get up, pull yourself up by your bootstraps' then at some point the person is just going to say, 'No, no more, I can't.'. But if we take things one day at a time – and do what the disciples did – and look to Jesus – and with Jesus' words and promises in our ears, Jesus lifts us up so we can follow him – one day at a time.

But is Jesus worth following? The disciples would run away in the garden but an empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection appearances would put things into perspective so that however and wherever they went – and they kept on sinning and struggling – they followed Jesus. Whatever they used to receive from the temple – from their Old Testament religion – from the old covenant – was now found and given in the new covenant – in and through Jesus. Forgiveness of sins, guidance how to live in one's relationships, forgiveness of sins, blessings from God, forgiveness of sins – for they had come to see that their Messiah was also their Passover Lamb and God was bringing about new life in a world of sin and death.

Roughly 40 years elapsed between Jesus' talk to the disciples to the destruction of the temple for God always seeks mercy before judgement – grace before wrath. But the temple's destruction once it had occurred is now a sign that the last days have begun – remember that a day is as a thousand years with the Lord and vice versa – and that God is still being merciful to this world because he is still pointing us to where he will be found in grace and mercy – giving endurance and faith – and that is through Jesus Christ and him alone.