

“Stayin’ Alive” – Lk 21:5-19 – Nov 14, 2010

I wonder how it turned out. A few years ago a religious sect in Russia holed themselves up in a cave in the hills. They tucked themselves away complete with stockpiles of food, water, toilet paper and who knows what all else! They were waiting for the world to end – well, at least that there will be some global catastrophe – within a few weeks and they figured they would be the only survivors. Needless to say, the leader of the sect did not go into that cave with them – he stayed outside to “keep an eye on things outside.” Still, I wonder how they behaved when their stockpiles ran out, and they emerged to find the world pretty much as they had left it? Had to be kind of embarrassing, I would think.

But that’s not a unique event – every now and again some group convinces themselves – usually with the help of a self-appointed prophet – that they have correctly aligned the signs they think they see in the natural disasters and figure they can calculate with great precision exactly when the end of all things as we know it will occur. Ripples of excited anticipation periodically flutter through the Christian world community over this very subject. You’ve seen the bumper stickers, I’m sure – the ones that say “Caution, in the event of the rapture, this vehicle will be unmanned!” Believers point to bible texts such as today’s reading from Luke to justify their belief that in an instant they will be accelerated from dawdling slowly along in the HOV lane to zooming through the clouds on the way to a horn-free paradise, while their car continues driverless to fulfill the mission of righteously imposing slow-speed behaviour to those miserable unfortunates left behind.

There’s a great pity about the unmanned vehicle bumper sticker – not just that many of the vehicles displaying them already seem to be driverless – but a great pity in how the bible is misused so often in this way. For example, Jesus is not talking here about a magical rapture; instead he is talking about the ‘ordinary’ ills and woes that will beset people. So let’s take another look in some detail at just what Jesus did say – and why – and to whom – and perhaps we will be able to see that what he had to say to his listeners is equally for us as well.

To avoid misusing the bible, it is always critically important to understand the context of any given passage. In today’s reading from Luke’s gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem, in the final days before his arrest and execution. He has warned his closest followers about those catastrophic events soon to unfold, but they don’t seem to have caught on how serious it all is. I think we can understand how Jesus, focused upon the events that would forever change in a foundational way how we can be reconciled with God, how he might be just a little bit sensitive about people being superficial in their faith, and sensitive about people being distracted by the tinsel with which the faith is often obscured.

“Oooh!” “Aaaah!” The religious tourists, gathered in front of the Temple, gush with wonder and awe at the things that man hath wrought – in God’s name, of course! “Oooh!” “Aaaah!” “Look at those huge stones, and the way they’re put together. Check out the magnificent doors, and the tile floors, and the fixtures. It’s enough to make you believe!” I heard plenty of these comments as we toured some impressive cathedrals in England. Luke has even included some of those very same comments in his gospel, quoting people talking about how “the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.”

How then did Jesus speak to those tourists? Was he frustrated? Perhaps a little. Disappointed? Maybe. Saddened? Quite likely. One more time Jesus spoke to the people, hoping to convey to them how transient are the things built by humans, even if they last a thousand years or more, and how insignificant such buildings are compared to the power of the

love of God. "... not one stone will be left upon another" Jesus said, beginning to describe to them the very real catastrophe that would indeed follow within a generation.

Naturally enough their first questions are "when?" and "how will we know? (what will be the signs?)" Those are the kinds of questions we would ask. Not many people ask beforehand, "what does it mean?", although many did ask just that after the Temple was indeed destroyed – literally torn down stone by stone – by the Romans in 70 A.D., less than 40 years after this encounter between Jesus and the religious tour group. The early Christians had no trouble answering the question "what does it mean?" because they remembered what Jesus had said, how he had foretold this very event.

They remembered also that Jesus went on to describe fateful events that would not only impact the world but that would give hints that the end was drawing near. You've heard the litany, for nervous Christians still run through it, looking for a match with current events. Wars and rumours of wars and insurrections, nations rising against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, famines and plagues, and dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. It is the stuff that makes for great – and often not-so-great – movies, and books, and placards and even barn-burning fiery sermons. I think we've passed the end of the world as prophesied by the Mayan (or was it the Incan?) calendar, but the next big retreat to the bunkers will be triggered by the 'prophecy' of Nostradamus that the world will end on Dec 21, 2012 – I guess we should postpone our Christmas shopping until the 22nd that year!

Ah yes, people sort of remember the predictions here in Luke's gospel. But how many remember how Jesus wrapped the meat of these predictions between two great slices of caution and hope? In the first of these cautions, Jesus warned his listeners – and today's readers as well – warned us to be ever, ever so cautious about those who would use these events to stir up followers. "Beware that you are not led astray", he cautioned. "Many will come in my name – i.e. calling themselves Christian – saying, 'the time is at hand!'", Jesus warned his listeners, and warns those who would listen today, "do not follow them!" That's a pretty clear caution not to leap too quickly into panicking, isn't it?

And then there's the second caution, that follows his brief outline of the kinds of escalating chaos that will signal the end of the Temple. Yes, the end of the Temple, because that's what Jesus was talking about to those tourists, not the end of the world. "Before all this occurs", he cautioned, and went on to outline how the faithful would be persecuted, tried and killed, hated by even close family and friends, all because they dared to proclaim that they believed in Jesus, and his resurrection. And then he concluded with a charge and a challenge to the people, and a message of hope that their faithful endurance, their enduring in faith would be rewarded by God.

Those events did come to pass, just as Jesus foretold. Before the Temple was torn down so that not one stone rested upon another the early believers were indeed persecuted, abused and tortured and executed horribly. They were indeed hated by family, friend and stranger alike, all for professing faith in God's love and redeeming action. Seems incredible, doesn't it, that so many would be treated so horribly for proclaiming love and healing and reconciliation and acceptance and peace?

Today we hear these words, and we too understand that the message from Jesus is broader than it first seems. Yes, he outlines in the briefest of summary the kinds of events that will occur, but we need also to hear his words of courage and hope and meaning. "When you hear of [these things] do not be terrified, he soothes us – they must take place first. These things are 'normal', and to be expected, we might paraphrase. Stuff happens. Big, cosmic stuff will

happen. “But before all this occurs”, he cautions us, more personal stuff will happen, and you and your faith will be challenged to limits you never expected nor dreamed of. “Have courage and hope”, the one who endured the cross and death itself in perfect faith assures us. “Not a hair of your head will perish”, the one who conquered even death declared to the tour group, and declares still to us. Yes, sticks and stones and other nasty things can break our bones, but the love for us and the relationship with God to which we are called, and in which with Christ’s help we will remain strong, is something that cannot wither nor perish nor be destroyed in any way. Jesus, the one standing in front of the Temple offering warning and hope to that ancient tour group, has become the risen Christ, whose endurance brought victory over even death. This is not the word of some scare-monger proclaiming doom and gloom and destruction in his name, this is the word of God, proclaimed by the Son of God, and echoed in faithful endurance over the centuries that we might now hear it, and in turn proclaim it to untold generations to follow.

Now, I don’t think many of us live in constant fear that the world will end catastrophically later today, or perhaps by Friday at the latest. But these words of comfort are still all very relevant to each and every one of us – because while the world may not end by Friday, there is always the very real possibility that our own personal world may come crashing in on us by then. Whether it could be word of someone close dying suddenly, or a medical diagnosis that brings fear and dreading, or the loss of a job, or any of the personal tragedies that are part of life and living – we need to hear, and believe, these words of promise and assurance spoken by the risen Christ. “Have courage and hope” Jesus assures us. “Not a hair of your head will perish” he promises – and of course that is not to be taken literally, implying that those who are bald miss out on the promise, but to be taken in the context in which it was given, that whatever life throws at us we are ultimately safe in the loving embrace of God made flesh in Christ Jesus. Exactly the opposite of the way this text is so often misused for fear-mongering, the real message of this text is an eternal assurance that even though the things of this world are transient, the love of God, the tender care of Jesus, the uplifting power of the Holy Spirit are eternal, everlasting, and for us.

Thanks be to Jesus Christ, who not only assures us that there is meaning and life with God, but willingly gave of himself to seal that assurance, and sent to us the Holy Spirit to sustain us in endurance until the day we join him in paradise to offer praise and thanksgiving and glory.