

“Before all this” – Lk 21:5-19 – Nov 14, 2004

Mount St. Helen's is huffing and puffing again. Another earthquake rumbles through Indonesia. Typhoons and earthquakes batter Japan. War continues in the Middle East, civil war erupts again in Africa, starvation and plagues in various places. It would be easy to read about these events in the newspaper, or watch the news on TV and quickly begin to wonder if the world was coming to an end. It's easy indeed to see in the more catastrophic actions of nature and humanity signs that everything will soon disintegrate, and all of us do that to a greater or lesser degree from time to time. Every now and again some group will convince themselves, usually with the help of a self-appointed prophet, that they have correctly aligned these signs around them, and 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 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 bringing righteous slow-speed behaviour to those miserable unfortunates left behind.

There's a great pity about that – not just the hopeful impeding of traffic, which seems to be the great hope of some righteous souls, but in misusing this text in such a way. While Jesus did talk about the world ending rather the way it started, in chaos, he was not talking about the end, never mind about some kind of instant rapture. Instead, he was presenting a very solid case that the end justifies the means, but not in the way that it often gets misused. 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 them is equally for us as well.

It might help to set the scene for this text. Jesus is in Jerusalem, in the final days before his arrest and execution. Although he has warned his closest followers about those catastrophic events soon to unfold, 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 people being distracted by the glitz that so often comes to the front in faith.

“Oooh!” “Aaaah!” The religious tourists, gathered in front of the Temple, express their 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!” We don't have to work hard to imagine the comments from the tourists who are appropriately impressed with the Temple they have come to see. We need only to keep our ears open as we tour some of the impressive cathedrals to hear the same kinds of words. We need only to read, for Luke has included some of those very comments in his gospel, describing how the people talked about how “the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.”

We need only to read also to hear how Jesus spoke 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 the things built by man are, 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 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, that anyone would ask. Few people would be moved to ask before the fact, “what does it mean?”, although many did 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 that question, 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 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 not-so-great, movies, and books, and placards and even barn-burning fiery sermons.

But how many remember how Jesus wrapped the meat of these predictions in two great slices of caution and hope? Not many people recall that before he even spoke of these events, Jesus warned his listeners – and that includes us reading it today – 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!”, he 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?

Then there’s the second caution, or warning about the warning. Jesus follows his brief outline of the kinds of escalating chaos that will signal the end of the Temple. Yes, the end of the Temple, for in the immediate context that’s what Jesus was talking about to those tourists. And indeed over the next 40 years the things of which Jesus spoke did indeed happen – wars and rumours of wars, insurrections, famines, plagues and even earthquakes and dreadful portents from heaven. “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.

And those events came 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?

But nothing’s changed, really, has it? People are still being treated horribly for proclaiming healing and reconciliation in the name of Christ. You’d think that the words Jesus spoke to the tour group were applicable today.

Luke understood that what Jesus had to say applied today as well, and manages to convey in his gospel how the words of Jesus to a specific group of people about events that would occur before the destruction of the Temple had a broader context, a broader significance. Even as he dealt with the reality of the destruction of the Temple, Luke understood that the warnings and cautions from Jesus needed to be heard by the people of faith, but perhaps even more importantly the message of hope needed to be heard as well.

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. 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.

We are living in the time called “before all this”. It is our turn to hear these words of caution, these words of meaning and hope, these words of challenge and call. It’s easy when times are easy to lay stones upon stones – it is more difficult when times are challenging to proclaim faith and meaning and hope and certainty, but that is exactly what we are being challenged and called to do here. No matter what comes our way, no matter what disasters and catastrophes we might have to face, we are assured by the one who endured all things on our behalf that “By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

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.