

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst

West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Thirty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
13th November 2022

The scene of today's Gospel is the Temple in Jerusalem. It is Holy Week; Jesus has made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, he has driven the money changers from the Temple, and the chief priests and scribes are looking, every day, for a way to kill him. The scribes have sent spies to pretend they are asking honest questions, when in reality they are just trying to catch Jesus out. He, in turn, has openly and publicly denounced them for their greed and their hypocrisy. The Passover is approaching; the crowds are beginning to gather for the festival, and each morning they come to the Temple to listen to the Lord preaching; the Romans are starting to get edgy.

In this tense and highly-charged atmosphere, Jesus sits and watches the people coming to The Temple. When people comment on its beauty, he lobbs a bomb into the crowd: its all going to be destroyed, not one of these magnificent stones will be left standing on another. Jerusalem, the city of peace, is going to be swallowed up in violence and destruction. Everything that is familiar is going to topple, and even this Temple, the unique dwelling-place of God on earth in the Jewish way of thinking, will be gone. This sounds like a disaster! God's dwelling, destroyed; Jerusalem ruins – whatever is to be done? No, says Jesus, this is your opportunity to bear witness; it is an opportunity, not a disaster. In difficult times it becomes much more clear who it is that has their life built on solid rock, and whose is built on sand. As the stones are falling and the fires are blazing, it will become very clear who has placed their trust in the things that are eternal, and who has not.

Only forty years or so later, the Temple in Jerusalem would, indeed, be destroyed. We all hope not to live through times like that, but we know that the world is always on the move, always changing, and we do not know what challenges may face us. But 'your endurance will win you your lives' – what is this endurance that helps people overcome even the most turbulent of times?

In these last days before the Passion, Jesus is teaching every day in the Temple, and his followers are there to listen to him from early in the morning onwards (Lk 21.38). The first thing that marks out the people who will be able to endure the great trials, is that they stay close to Jesus Christ. They do not go off on their own and hope that they can come scurrying back to him when the going gets tough: they know that they need to build a strong, loving, open and deep relationship with him well before the fires begin to blaze. The depth of our discipleship, our prayer, our knowledge of the scriptures, this is the measure of our readiness to face the trials. If our endurance will win us our lives, the foundation on which that endurance is built is our closeness to Christ.

Then our endurance also depends on memory. It depends on us reminding ourselves of all that God has done for us. At the times when we feel flaky, feel unsure, feel beset with doubts, that is the time to tell ourselves again the story, the story of how we first fell in love with Jesus Christ, how he first warmed our hearts, how we first came to realise that he was the key to making sense of our lives. Probably the most powerful tool in sharing our faith with other people is to tell

the story. Have you listened to someone explain how the Lord helped them – helped them realise what really matters in life, helped them understand how to survive temptations, and trials, and failures? I imagine that if we look hard enough we can all tell stories that make us think ‘God is great!’ and while it is a great thing to share these stories with one another, it is no bad thing to tell them to ourselves from time to time.

The world is full of idols and illusions, ideas and ways of living that appear to offer us happiness and fulfilment, but which in fact set out to imprison us. The more we live our daily lives in the world of illusions and fakery, the more vulnerable we become. If we want to have the strong and secure hearts that Christ describes in this Gospel reading, we need to fill our lives with what is true, and spiritual, and really human, really life-giving – we need to cultivate the ability to see the world and all that is in it as God sees them, to judge the value of everything as God does. Then we will be better able to judge the things that must be clung onto at all costs, as opposed to those which can, however regretfully, be relinquished.

‘I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction’, God says (Entrance antiphon). God’s plan for us is an eternity where peace prevails, and affliction is but a memory. We are not there yet. There are still many opportunities for disaster, for destruction, for loss and for anxiety. To wait until those times come before getting ready to counter them is tempting, but foolish. Endurance, perseverance, resilience, these are built up slowly over the passage of time. They are the fruits of time spent close to Christ; of reminding ourselves of the stories of his past triumphs in our lives, of learning to see the world and all that is in it as God sees them. To Jesus, the Temple looks terribly fragile, but in spite of that he knows that ‘all will be well’. This is what gives power and substance to his promise that endurance – perseverance, faithfulness, will win us our lives.