

Sermon TSP 26th Sunday After Pentecost Year C – 13 November 2016

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls. **NRSV Luke 21:5-19**

"All These Stones"

What a week it's been! Maybe you saw the picture in social media, of a Church Sign in Massachusetts - it read, "***Jesus is coming. Hopefully before the election.***" ☺ I spent Monday to Thursday with clergy from all across Canada at a preaching conference. Our guest professor was from Georgia, and when she saw that we Canadians were just as anxious as she was, we all huddled together to watch the election that left the world in such shock and disbelief. Since then, I've been trying to keep up with the commentaries, trying to make sense of what happened - what it means when a business-oriented person with no political experience takes over the highest, most powerful political position in the world. Add to that the rhetoric of hate, racism, exclusion and misogyny, and the fact that he doesn't even seem to care that statements he **denies** can be proven instantly with blatantly incriminating footage, and we're left with a lot of confused and frightened people.

So what do we do with this? You've heard me say that it's not up to me to tell people who to vote for or which political party is better. My role as a spiritual leader is to be clear about what Jesus taught us was important as we make our decisions. But when someone speaks a vile rhetoric of fear and hate and exclusion into the world, I'm going to say something. I have to. Now, we don't know how this will play out, and we know that there's a lot going on under the surface in terms of what people were resisting in this election, but here's something to think about. People are deeply concerned because values they thought were universal are now in question. People are afraid that racism and exclusion and treating women without respect, have been "normalized" during this campaign. Since the election, there are reports about little children telling their Muslim classmates that they'll soon be deported. And crude jokes that

objectify women have been circulating at an alarmingly increased rate. I've read articles from the U.K., Canada and Europe expressing concern about these trends spreading out from the United States.

People are asking, "What can we do to resist this?" Well, here's a start...maybe our reaction should be to dig deep within ourselves, and figure out who we really are, and what values are most important to us. You know, we've been fairly sheltered in North America, particularly those of us with white privilege. We can spout a rhetoric that's politically correct, because it costs us nothing. But it looks like now is the time to put ourselves on the line to stand up for what is most important. If we truly value racial equality - if we really believe women should be treated with respect - if we're honestly offended when we hear someone talking about deporting innocent citizens, then it's time to shake off our protected comfort zones and speak up - to live into what we say we believe. We generally assume that people **want** to be kind, to respect others, to be honest and to care about vulnerable people. But now we have an opportunity to **sharpen our awareness** of how we want to live...an opportunity to be more **intentional** about living with grace and respect. A chance to speak up when we see signs of this "normalization" of treating others poorly.

A priest from this area wrote an open letter to her adult sons on social media, and many of us followed her example. She wrote that open misogyny, hatred, fear, racism, and bold faced lying have taken the reins of power in our neighbours to the south, proving that any one of us, any nation, can lay aside kindness, honesty, love and mercy the moment they feel their privilege is threatened. She went on to say that she herself would look within to find the grace to preach love and to try to live it, but that she had great hope that her sons and their generation, who were raised to be tolerant, to be excited by diversity and difference, would lead us into a future where love and mercy would remain paramount as they reshape our world.

What I'm getting at here is a suggestion that while riots may or may not be the answer, I don't think that being quiet or ignoring the facts is an alternative for those of us who follow Christ. At a time like this, we're called to speak our truth and model it clearly for all to see. Something I've been thrilled to see in response to the deluge of hate and fear, is the bold voice of love - a voice that has faith in strength and integrity that exists in the hearts of most people. Trusting that God's power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. And as is so often the case, today's gospel helps us to see how to respond when what's important is threatened.

Jesus is responding to people who are admiring the great beauty of the Temple. He warns them that at any moment, the Temple could be razed to the ground - and all those huge stones that made the mighty walls will be reduced to a pile of rubble. He predicts great upheaval and

betrayal. What's Luke getting at here? Luke is trying to make a statement about the impermanence and uncertainty of human achievement. The people are marvelling at the Temple's glory, but Jesus pulls their attention away from its beauty and structure, hoping that they'll focus on something that's much more important....their faith, and how it shows up in their lives. Just before this story, Jesus had drawn their attention to a poor widow putting her two coins into the treasury. Nobody would have ever noticed her amidst the grandeur of the Temple, and the respected leaders parading with their prayers and great offerings, until Jesus pointed out that she was an example for all of them - it was her heart that was sincere.

We can have the most beautiful place of worship in the world, and still get it all wrong. What's more important than the building is what we learn while we're inside, and how we take it into our lives and into the world. That's what the people said in Mississippi when the church of a Black congregation was burned and vandalized by political haters....they said you can burn down our church building, but you can't take away our faith. God's transformation of their lives was not something that could be destroyed.

This is certainly a challenging story for us right now. The question of the importance of our house of worship is a complex one. Recently, I've had occasion to go downtown to our Cathedral a few times. And you know, when you walk toward it, the bells calling you in from way down the street, there's something quite beautiful you feel as you go inside. This is our Diocesan Mecca. Our Jerusalem. This is the great Cathedral that has gathered us together in Christ's name for decades. The ceilings are high and the surroundings are glorious. The choir is heavenly and the organ is majestic. It's wonderful. And it's emotional. It hits us on a very real, visceral, human level. And I think of our family from St. Paul Lorne Park, and the grief that is still very real about losing the place where God touched you, met you, challenged you - where there were weddings and funerals and baptisms and celebrations over the years -- beautiful memories that go deep, but now that building is no longer home. Buildings do matter. And I think of the Trinity people who have the same deep connections right here, in this space, all that history, all the prayers whispered in this space, and now we're in the process of changing things, and it feels uncertain. Buildings do matter. I for one, am thrilled at the wisdom of your vestry vote that said that getting to the bottom of the structural issues causing flooding is to come first in our priorities. I think your wisdom in this will pay off big time. And the changes to the worship space are **also** practical, in fixing a spongy floor, and bringing us up to full accessibility with a code ramp, which the Diocese and the Province both insist on. I believe you've been faithful stewards of these resources coming to us. We're not going for fancy - we're going for solid. Thank God for that.

But in all of this, I am aware that our worship spaces mean just as much to us as they did to those people centuries ago, who travelled miles whenever they could, to get to Jerusalem's

beautiful Temple. We can't help but become attached to our places of worship. They mean something to us. Our prayers are in them, our stories are in them, our faith journeys have been formed in them. And I think Jesus gets that. I think he sees it. He knows what it's like to make that trip to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple...to see the scrolls be taken out and read to the people of God. And yet, Jesus tells us that buildings are not forever, but our faith **is**. Jesus knows that our life of faith must go beyond our temples and synagogues and holy places. He knows that there will come a time for all of us when we will be called on to give an accounting of our faith outside of these walls. A time like the present. So we have to ask ourselves, without this building, what's left? How would our faith and trust in God survive the loss of this structure?

My friends, we are called to be good stewards of our buildings and the money we use to maintain them. But we are also called to be good stewards of the Great Story of Salvation and Liberation that we tell within these walls. We are called to **bear witness** to the world about what matters the most. Even in apocalyptic times, when things get rough, when money runs short, when governments fall apart or challenge our peace. What is Jesus' answer to how we respond to these apocalyptic events? Testify, he says! Tell the world what you have found in following me. Now, I'm not talking about standing on a soapbox and screaming about Jesus from the street corners. I run away from people like that. I'm talking about living an authentic life out there that shows who we really are and models what we believe. Tell that person who feels unworthy that they matter to God, that they are precious to God, even when the world sets them aside. Tell that local politician that you're counting on them to care for the marginalized. I think we church people always live in this tension between the faithful and responsible care of our buildings, and the faithful sharing of what we call the Good News. Our faith is not confined to a building or defined by it. We will do our best to care for it, but Jesus says, when things get tough, tell your stories of salvation. Tell what these years of gathering here around word and table have done for you - how they've changed your life. When a nearby government seems to threaten what's important to you, testify! Tell your children and your neighbours that you believe in love and mercy and truth and grace, and that no influence from any womanizer, liar or racist, will ever change that.

My friends, the world is full of the grace and love of God. The people of God down through the centuries, even in the hardest of times, have been called to speak up against oppression - to stand strong for justice. And today Luke asks us, where, and on what, is our gaze fixed? If our eyes are locked on temporary things, we might miss seeing those beautiful things that will last. If we only see grandeur and splendour, we may miss finding the beauty in the lost soul nearby. And if we blindly tolerate or ignore the negative rhetoric out there right now, we might miss our chance to affirm all that is life-giving, all that is worthy and true.

What the world needs right now, is people who dare to humbly say out loud what we've learned within these walls - to speak boldly about peace overcoming violence, about truth overcoming lies, about love overcoming hate, about care for others overcoming greed. My friends, it's time to share who we are and how we've been transformed by love. It's time to **testify! *Hallelujah!***