

Sunday 13th November 2022

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“Even beautiful temples need to come down”

Luke 21:5-19

The disciples are looking on at the temple and celebrating its beauty and significance. There’s no doubt they derive security from this impressive structure and it’s the source of no small amount of national pride. It’s my understanding that the Jerusalem temple was one of the most splendid structures of all antiquity and it stood apparently strong and invincible as the centre of Jewish civilisation. But it was even more than that; the temple was the place where God lived among them.

And here comes Jesus predicting the collapse of all this...“ the days are coming” He says, “when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

In response to this devastating prediction – interestingly the disciples don’t dispute the possibility with Jesus, it seems like they believe Him – but they want to know the details. When will this happen? How are we going to know it’s the time? What signs should we look out for? More details please Jesus??? If you’re going to tell us that the Temple’s coming down then give us a bit more, give us something to hold onto, give us some sense of control!

Does that sound about right to you? As hard as it might be to deal with profound change or significant upheaval, it’s often the uncertainty surrounding these things which gets us the most. Not knowing is deeply unsettling and it undermines our ability to determine outcomes, to plan, or to ensure safety – physical or emotional - for ourselves and those we love.

For the disciples, Jesus’ announcement of the Temple’s imminent destruction must have been confusing for them. They were still struggling to grasp how all of this was going to play out, but expectations that Jesus meant to vindicate Israel before her enemies were still prominent – how was that going to work if He intended that the monument to their national life was going to be destroyed?

It seems kind of fair that they’d want a bit more information, but Jesus doesn’t give it, He just carries on with His message for them.

While we don’t have the equivalent of the Jewish temple in our culture or the threat of its demise to contend with, we are living in an age when much that is precious to us seems under threat, and almost all that’s familiar is undergoing change - it feels as though the sands beneath our feet are shifting and our stability is in peril.

We’re living in days when the temples of our life and world are teetering and falling. The church throughout the Western world is confronted with diminished influence and falling numbers. As a country the temple of our economic system is crumbling and the social fabric is likewise fraying as never before. Globally, conflicts and wars persist, refugee numbers skyrocket, and the ecological crisis threatens to change life as we know it. Temples falling everywhere.

Michael Marsh of the “Interrupting the Silence” website writes, “

We all have temples. Some have been given to us, others we have built for ourselves. Sometimes our temples are people, places, values and beliefs, institutions, dreams. Regardless, they are the things that we think structure and order our lives, give meaning and identity, provide security and stability. At least we think they do, until they fall.

What are some of the temples in our lives? What are the precious things that support and sustain us? What things inform our identity and make us to feel good about ourselves? What are we dependent upon to give meaning to our days? Thinking about these things that we lean into and depend upon for security and stability, Marsh says,

“Jesus looks at it and says, “The days are coming when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” Jesus is speaking about more than just the physical temple in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem temple includes every temple you and I have.”

One of those temples may be the ways that we’re accustomed to “doing” church. It may be ideas and understandings of faith. Our ideas about the future of St. Paul’s could also take temple shape if they’re formed of hopes and expectations that we’ve invested too much in. If we’ve predetermined in our hearts and minds how things will be – or how we *need* them to be – then we’re building temples that will likely have to be dismantled.

As beautiful as Jerusalem’s Temple may have been, and as good as our ideas may be about how things should be going forward, if they’re any kind of substitute for Jesus Himself then they have to go. Once Jesus came and dwelt among humanity, God was present in the flesh here on earth. The Temple’s purpose had become redundant. And even more so once Jesus departed the earth and gave His Spirit to His church...now, *together*, we are the temple of God, we are the presence of God in every place. No building or baubles required – just you and me filled with the Spirit of God and bearing the presence of God to wherever we are.

This is our identity, meaning, security, and stability, it’s Jesus. And anything else that we build our lives upon or which we depend upon to vest our lives with purpose must suffer the fate of Israel’s Temple and be torn down.

Jesus’ response to the disciples request for more details indicates His concern that they, and we, not get this wrong. That is, Jesus doesn’t actually answer their questions about timing or signs, instead He urges them, “Beware that you are not led astray...”

It’s amazing how much interest talk about the end of the world and predictions of apocalyptic events seems to generate. Everything else is forgotten as the focus shifts to reading and interpreting the signs as a misplaced focus on the future takes the place of concern with what it means to follow Jesus rightly in the here and now.

Passages like this one aren’t meant to turn us into people obsessed with the interpretation of global events, ever alert for some critical sign. There certainly has

been – and still are – Christians who try and interpret the Scriptures like a map of the future. They turn passages like Luke 21, and whole books like Revelation into a kind of secret code that, if we can just crack it, will spell out in neat and precise details the future's exact timeline. The sad thing is, that in many cases, the same level of enthusiasm and energy is not invested in living out God's kingdom purposes while they wait! To go back to Marsh, he says,

Change has a way of pushing us into the future. Many people will begin looking for signs about the future. What will happen now? What do I do? How do I get through this? If we are not careful we will soon be living in a future we do not yet have. We will be living in a future created in our heads. That is not Jesus' response. When Jesus describes things that will happen he is not asking us to speculate about the future. He is offering signs that call us to be faithful in the present.

Passages like our gospel reading this morning are meant to inspire discipleship and faithfulness over the long-haul and through all of the tough and challenging circumstances we'd face long before the End would come. Jesus is giving the disciples a heads-up, He doesn't want them to be surprised when everything unravels, as though perhaps God has forgotten them. He's assuring them that He knows what's coming and He knows it's going to be really hard but He's encouraging them to remain faithful, to not be deceived or lured away by rival claims. He tells them not to be terrified and assures them of the Holy Spirit's assistance when they're called to give an account of their confidence in Christ. And our passage for today ends with the reassurance that not a hair on their heads will perish, and that by their endurance, they will gain their souls.

Jesus' words were an in-time exhortation and encouragement to the disciples. They didn't know about the imminent fall of Jerusalem but Jesus showed them by His words that He did – this alone would have given a degree of comfort to the disciples, but Jesus goes on to urge them to trust and faithfulness and to reassure them that they would not be alone through the upcoming tumultuous time.

Jesus's words still speak to us in 2022. We're to be wary of what we've invested our hope and identity in – what are our temples? What are we reaching for as the world becomes ever more uncertain? What are we holding onto more tightly – these are our temples? Have we allowed Jesus' place and priority to be usurped by familiar traditions and ways when He is calling us to walk with Him through the rubble of the known towards the adventure of the unknown with Him?

Our passage makes no bones of the potential hardship before us if we say "Yes" to Jesus. In many ways Luke 21 is a passage we'd all rather not hear. We want Jesus to say something else. We want a different set of predictions and an alternative set of promises. We want Jesus to say, "Don't worry about trials and persecutions for I shall deliver you from them *before* they happen." But sadly that's not the message. However, He will be with us and He will bring us through. Yep, it's a bit scary, it's out of our control, we won't be spared the world's suffering and there's some

that'll be just for us Christians, if we're after an experience that's about safety and comfort – Christianity's not it! C.S. Lewis had it right when he said, "I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

But Christianity *is* the promise of a world made new and our own selves saved and restored.

If you'll indulge me I'd like to finish on a final quote by Michael Marsh,

Those promises are fulfilled through our endurance. By endurance we gain our lives, our souls... We are to remain fully present, faithful, no matter how uncomfortable life may be. In so doing we discover that God has always been with us – in the changes, chances, and chaos of life; in the pain, loss, and disappointment; in the destruction of our temples.

Endurance, perseverance, stability are the ways in which we offer God the fallen stones of our temples. Stone by stone God rebuilds our life. Stone by stone God restores the original beauty of our life and world. Stone by stone a new temple arises from the rubble. Stone by stone we become the temple of God. We no longer have temples. We no longer need them. We are the temple. That is the story that needs to be told. That is our opportunity to testify.