

LUKE 21:5-19

Introduction

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The poem "Ozymandias", by Shelley, has haunted me since I first heard it in High School. I could not help thinking about it as I watched the World Trade Centre Towers burn and collapse into a heap of rubble, leaving only a few skeletal facades and twisted girders stuck in the debris as evidence of what had once been the two greatest icons of Western achievement – our temple of industry, trade, commerce and high finance. We saw our comfort and security collapsing with it, and many wondered if this marked the beginning of the end. Had the Apocalypse come now?

I could not help thinking about it once again when I read today's gospel from Luke.

Trouble in the Bible

The Temple in Jerusalem was architecturally grand with splendid decoration - impressive in its beauty and size - the foundation stones were huge, almost the size of boxcars. In extent it covered about 1/6 of the ancient city. To a group of his followers who were admiring its grandeur, Jesus said that the time was coming when the Temple would be so thoroughly destroyed that one stone would not stand on another. All that would be left would be a heap of rubble.

What's more, there would be wars and uprisings, earthquakes, famines and pestilences. The city itself would be devastated in a time of vengeance, trodden under the boot of the barbarians. There would be incredible misery and torrential rage. People would drop like flies. Others would be dragged off to prison. The very elements would be in an uproar. Indeed, it would seem as if all hell had broken loose; and everyone all over the world would be in a panic with foreboding of what was to come.

But before all of that happened Jesus' followers would be persecuted - arrested, hunted down and dragged off to courts and jail. Everyone would be at their throat because of their association with him. Even parents, brothers and friends would turn against them. Some would not only be put on trial, but would be killed. It was not an encouraging prospect at all.

We know from the Jewish historian Josephus that Jesus was not indulging in speculation about these events. In the year 70 CE Jerusalem did fall to the Roman armies, the Temple was destroyed and the Jewish nation was obliterated. One million one hundred thousand people died in that conflict. Ninety-seven thousand survivors were carried off into captivity.

Trouble in Our World

When we consider the news of the day, on any given day, it would appear that the end of times is imminent ... soon, if not before.

There are wars and insurrections Iraq, North Korea, Chechnya, India / Pakistan, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, to say nothing of the horrors in Rwanda and Somalia. Nation has risen against nation as is currently evidenced by the conflicts in Iraq and the Ivory Coast. There have been great earthquakes, most recently in Japan. In various places there are famines and plagues Atypical pneumonia, Sars, Aids, Bird Flu, starvation in Africa and North Korea. There are dreadful portents and great signs from heaven the worst hurricane season in memory, an unusual number of cyclones and tornadoes, a gaping hole in the ozone layer, the melting of the polar ice cap, drought in Africa, India, Sri Lanka and Australia. Christians in the Middle East, China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka are being persecuted and some have been imprisoned, even killed. Indeed, In the 20th century more Christians died for their faith than in all the centuries back to Christ put together.

We live in a fearful time when all creation is threatened. Nuclear apocalypse would entail incredible fire storms, resulting in soot that would block 95% of the sun. All land plants would be damaged or destroyed; all biological life would be in jeopardy. We hold the powers of life and death in our hands. In addition to nuclear winter, ecological disaster, thinning ozone, shrinking resources, exploding populations, and widespread famine constantly threaten us. Because we hold the powers of life and death in our hands for mankind and the world we may be the first generation to understand Jesus on the subject of the end of times.

Moreover, apocalypse need not be confined just to the broader world. The great Temple of Judeo-Christian culture, has been totally

undermined and is shaking down around our heads. But our temples are not necessarily just buildings. They can be whatever structures we erect in our minds, imaginations and hearts that hold our faith together – marriage, family, creed, theological system, national pride, economic programs, our jobs and self images. We experience many endings. Our world can be destroyed by divorce, depression, recession, unemployment, disease and epidemics. We are not GOING to experience Apocalypse – we are in the midst of it, and its very hard to see the grace.

Grace in the Bible

Jesus did not give his followers the option to escape from these times – they will happen. But he did not abandon them. He promised his disciples that they would not have to meet their tribulations alone. He promised to take care of their defense when the time comes – to give them words and wisdom none of their adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. He promised them that not a hair on their heads would perish; speaking in this instance not of their physical bodies but of their spiritual bodies; promising they would be whole and enter into his presence with great glory. He believed in them enough to offer them not an easy way, but a way for heroes.

He also gave them advice and strategies about how best to protect themselves: He warned them not to be deceived by false prophets, into departing from the truth; not to be frightened into failing to be a witness for Him; and not to be distracted into living as if this life is all there is – to watch and pray that they may be counted worthy to escape these things that will come to pass and stand before the Son of Man.

God, he said, would warn them, and provide an escape for those who heeded the rumblings. They were advised to be constantly vigilant; and to flee the city should they see the soldiers beginning to surround it.

Grace in Our World

When our world falls apart we too are to look to God.

Jesus does not say the temple will be destroyed and the world along with it so put down your hymn books, lock the church doors, don't waste your time having services, doing out-of-the-cold programs, marrying or burying, going to work Get ready for the end is approaching. He says, do not listen to the false prophets, roll up your sleeves and do the steady confident work of a faithful disciple. God will bring the kingdom in God's good time, our calling is to do his work every day and to endure. By such endurance we will gain our lives.

God will give us the means and the strength to sustain us in our tribulations. He will not abandon us any more than he abandoned his disciples in the first century. ..but there will be trials to endure; and we are expected to do our part.

When families break it is then that disciples are needed to bear witness to forgiveness and a new beginning. When government programs collapse and homeless or frightened people are cast into unsafe settings it is then disciples are needed to proclaim that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. When the church becomes weakened and numbers decline and the bills seem impossible to meet it is then that disciples are needed to bear witness to a vision of faith that moves them to generous and steadfast support.

God continues to provide warning signals that all is not right in our world- war, natural disasters, economic woes, ...the breakdown of our society.

We will feel the pain of loss, anger against attackers, the fear of tragedy. However, when the Christian sees fear we rest our hope in Jesus Christ, and take refuge in knowing that God is in control.

Our rock is Jesus Christ. He said these things must come to pass but our hope is in Him and our eternal inheritance

