

Sermon for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

In our Gospel text this morning, those disciples came to their Lord with two questions:

“When?” and “What will be the sign?”

“When will the destruction of our eternal, beloved temple take place, and what will be the sign that this ultimate judgment upon man is about to come down?”

They’re reasonable questions after such a deliberately provocative claim on his part. And so sitting down to teach them, Jesus more or less lays it all out. Though not in our portion of the text today, he makes it clear that the day and hour of such things is not for them to know - not for ANYONE to know, in heaven or on earth, save the Father. Yet at the same time, his disciples ARE to know - indeed, they MUST know - and recognize the signs that their judgment is coming, for only the one who recognizes is properly prepared to endure to the end, and only the one who endures to the end will be saved.

And what are these signs? Well, in a word, “sobering.” False Christs - claiming of themselves “I

AM,” with many believing in them. Wars...

Nations in feverish conflict... Earthquakes and famines - essentially, what is left of this blighted world finally rotting away, with the people clinging to it soon to drink God’s wrath down to the dregs.

And even the faithful in that day forced to witness it all steadfastly, while knowing these to be only the “birth pains” of what is finally to come.

And for those Apostles to be sent into that world, it was to become more sobering - for to them he says, “And YOU will be delivered over

to councils; beaten in synagogues. YOU will be made to stand before rulers - on trial, with outcomes no doubt already determined. Even the closest of loved ones will forsake their own, handing them over to death. And YOU will be hated by all... for the sake of him whose name you bear.”

Sobering words indeed.

Made even more sobering as we read the fate of those Apostles as recorded in the Book of Acts and hear the stories about them passed down through the ages. Likely made more sobering still as we also consider now ourselves - as ones STILL looking forward; STILL living in the same apostolic 8th day, a day still primed to give way to the world's judgment.

For our Lord's words stand not merely to report on future events - not simply as a forecast of life amidst the grey and latter days ahead. They stand as a dire warning - a warning against the threat of apostasy; a warning against the very REAL and CREDIBLE TEMPTATION to fall away, thereby subjecting ourselves to the judgment that is already reserved for those outside the kingdom.

How real and how credible? Consider how within just the past two years of pandemic, the wider Christian church has suffered - not just in death to those lives lost in illness, but in the loss of the multitudes who likely have fallen away permanently simply on account of fears and disagreements over how to react.

Yet, pestilence doesn't even number among the threats our Lord mentions: those wars, persecutions, earthquakes, famines - cold reminders of a world spinning madly towards its demise. And there, in the midst of these tragedies, the greatest threat of all: those who will seek to capitalize on them in usurping the place rightly belonging to God. Those who will prey upon the flock dressed in a sheep's clothing of false revelation, and preaching a word abused and twisted towards their own purposes. How subtle and cunning they

will be - claiming a hope of peace where there is none, deliverance from strife that they cannot provide. How easy it will be to give in to that kind of word... especially when the word turns out to be our own, and it is in fact none other than OURSELVES seeking our OWN endurance unto the end.

Sobering words... the words of our Lord having just left that earthly temple for the very last time, it's age coming to a close. The disciples were interested in that magnificent building with its wonderful stones and wonderful buildings. Indeed, the judgment against it - its desecration and destruction - would come within another generation or so. And the personal trials for those disciples were soon to come as well - their persecutions and, for all but one, martyrdom of blood. But I'd have to think that not incidental in Jesus' mind that day was the sobering reality of the date - with only days until the Passover, and the night he would be betrayed.

Thus would be set in motion the signs of another impending judgment - when those disciples, most certainly not on guard, but ASLEEP, abandoned their Lord, leaving him to face the trials, of which he so fervently warned, ALONE. Thus was the Son of Man delivered to the council to be charged and beaten. Thus was he made to stand before the local governor - Pontius Pilate, by name - as well as a figurehead king named Herod, a Lamb silent before all accusations. Having been handed over to death by one of his own chosen, twelve brothers, forsaken by his heavenly Father, crucified by the children of men, was he found guilty - despised, rejected, hated by all. Thus was the temple of his body desecrated and destroyed; the sacrifice for the sins of an entire world made complete in his enduring to the very end.

And isn't THAT when the judgment for OUR sins came? The judgment that counts? The verdict declaring that sin and death are FINISHED - once and for all?

The earthly temple, with its wondrous stonework, truly
IS finished. Its stones remain toppled
over - that location now long the site of an Islamic shrine. But we now seek the
temple that, in only
three-days time, WAS rebuilt - a body raised back imperishable, incorruptible,
and
that now is alive right here in mystical form, as we who are in him gather in
his once despised name.

See, as it is HE who truly is the one who endured in
faithfulness until the end, it is only IN HIM that WE are made able to
endure. Only within the mystical body
of HIS church, rightly described in the rite which Seraphine just received as a
HOLY ARK that will deliver us from the destruction destined for the fallen
world around us. And how FORTUITOUS IT
IS to have witnessed that rite - the sprinkling clean from an evil conscience
and washing with pure water; her being purified and made righteous through the
intercession of our high priest's own shed blood. The anointing upon her head
and heart the
name of our Savior - a name still despised by the world, yet, by which she also
will be granted the grace to overcome it.
For there, her journey in faith through this same world began like all
of ours, and by God's grace will CONTINUE as all of ours - now worthy of
drawing
near into the holy places of this altar, to be fed and nourished with the body
and blood of the Lamb; the very sacrificial Lamb of God who bore the world's
sin.

So thus are we now, with Seraphine and all the saints,
to be among the many grains brought into the ONE loaf; the many grapes pressed
into the ONE cup. Gathered into the ONE
holy ark - the ONE holy, Christian and apostolic Church - built upon the ONE
foundation of Christ Jesus. We confess
one Lord, one faith, one birth... ONE in him eternally... for it is the ONE who
endures to the end who WILL BE SAVED.

May God grant young Seraphine, and ALL of us, the
grace to remain steadfast within this one true confession unto the day of all

things new eternally in the church triumphant.

+++

Preached

by Rev. Christopher Clark

Sermon

Texts: Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-13.