

Proper 28C 2019 Sermon

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus 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."

Each November as we come to the end of the Church Year, we read Gospel passages like today's, where Jesus seems to prophesy what will happen at the end of the world. But is that *really* what Jesus is doing – foretelling an inevitable future? I don't think so; for the nature of prophecy in the Bible is not that it sees, through a crystal ball, events as they will certainly happen on some given day in the future. Rather, the nature of prophecy in the Bible is that the prophet, who is in intimate connection with God, looks deeply into the present state of the world, and what he or she sees, more often than not, is a profound incongruity between God's will and present human behavior. Since the prophet knows that ongoing human activity moving in a direction away from God's will inevitably ends in disaster, the prophet predicts destruction.

Let me give an example. When one of my brothers was in his late teens and early 20's, he became an alcoholic. He drank heavily, he put on lots of weight, and his blood pressure was sky high. One day, our father, who is a physician, sat him down and told him, "If you don't stop drinking, you're going to be dead in 5 years." Did our dad have a vision of a specific day, 5 years in the future, when my brother would die? No; he had no crystal ball. He just knew the path that alcoholism takes, and the very likely consequences of following that path. Fortunately, my brother listened to our dad's "prophecy". He never took another

drink, from that moment on, and has been sober for almost 40 years. Dad's "prophecy" about the future caused a change in my brother's behavior in the present.

Similarly, when God speaks through the Old Testament prophets and warns the people of impending catastrophe, God's intention is to affect the present behavior of the people. God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah, "O house of Israel... at one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation... *turns* from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it." (Jer. 18:5-10) The prophet Jonah prophesies to the people of Nineveh, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4) But this prophetic prediction does not happen, because the prophecy of the future affects the Ninevites' behavior in the present, and they repent of their evil ways.

Think of Biblical prophecies as similar to the vision that the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come reveals to Ebenezer Scrooge: The scene the Ghost shows Scrooge is what will most likely happen **IF** Scrooge does not change his ways – among those likely events being the death of Tiny Tim. But we know that the "prophetic" scene which the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge does NOT take place, since this vision of the future changes Scrooge's behavior in the present. Tiny Tim does NOT die, because Scrooge is transformed and becomes generous toward Tiny Tim and his family.

So, then, what of Jesus' prophecies in today's Gospel? Regarding the destruction of the Temple, Jesus knew the arrogance of the Jewish religious leaders and the inevitable conflict that their confrontation with the Romans would eventually take. By the time that Luke writes his Gospel, the fall of the Temple had already taken place, and knowing this fact likely colors Luke's telling of the story.

But something else is happening with Jesus' predictions of the sufferings that his disciples will face. Yes, many of *these* things have already happened by the time Luke writes his Gospel. But more importantly, these sufferings which Jesus predicts for his disciples *mirror* the sufferings Jesus himself goes through in his own earthly life. Fr. John Shea writes:

"Everything that happened to Jesus will happen to [his disciples], and it will happen to them precisely *because* they bear Jesus' name. They will be arrested (like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane), imprisoned and brought before kings (like Jesus was brought before Herod) and governors (like Jesus was arraigned before Pilate). Also, as Jesus was betrayed by Judas and abandoned by his disciples whom he called his brothers and sisters, [his disciples, also,] will be betrayed by family members and those closest to them.

“...But... Jesus, the one who has been through it before [as we sang in our opening hymn], will be *with* them and give them words to say... The passion [the suffering] of Jesus is not over; it continues in those who follow him.”¹

Now, you may have noted, in today’s Gospel, a seeming contradiction in Jesus’ words. First, Jesus says “they will put some of you to death” (v. 16), and then two verses later he says, “not a hair of your head will perish.” In the first instance, Jesus is talking about death of the *physical* body, while in the second instance, he is talking about the soul, the core of one’s being. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul...” (Matt. 10:28) In today’s Gospel, Jesus says, “They will put some of you to death, [...but] by your endurance you will gain your souls.” The Greek word translated “soul” means one’s True Life, one’s True Self, who one is in God.² For those who live in God, this True Self *cannot* be destroyed by those who kill the body.

Professor Amy Oden writes: “Endurance does not entail an ability to tolerate hardship... as much as it entails an ability to see God’s presence even *in* the intolerable... We persevere when we see it through, or rather, when we see *through* it. We persevere when we have eyes to see beyond the surface of things to the depths of God’s presence in them. ...This does not mean the hardship melts away, but rather that one is able to have faith, to live in fundamental trust...”³

Fr. Shea notes that we have lost much of this Biblical approach to the future, an approach that is steeped in faith and fundamental trust in God. In our day and age, we look to statisticians to predict the future. The Weather Channel tells us, with a fair amount of accuracy, the statistical probability that it will rain or snow tomorrow. Surgeons can tell us what to expect after surgery: how many days we will be in pain, when we will be well enough to go home, etc. In a revealing study, “Dr. Ellen Langer and her associates tested two different coping strategies with patients about to undergo major surgery. They provided one group with statistical data about pain and recovery that would help them predict what they were going to experience [after surgery]. With a second group they worked on helping them develop a positive lens, a frame [of meaning] through which to see their upcoming surgery. Then both groups were tracked with specific measures after their surgery. The second [group] fared significantly better.” (Ellen J. Langer, *The Power of Mindful Learning* [New York: Merloyd Lawrence Books, 1997] 128-30.)⁴ Knowing the meaning of what will happen is often more important than knowing the statistical details of what will happen.

“This way of knowing the meaning of the future is respectful of the future as an unknown reality,” writes Fr. Shea. “But it also brings it into the personal life of the one who is *facing* that future—a possibility of [a personal, experiential] response that was not previously available. John O’Donohue tells the story of a

woman... who, with the help of a priest, prepares herself to bring meaning into her future suffering. [O'Donohue writes:]

“A friend of mine went to the hospital to have a hysterectomy. A priest friend came to visit her on the evening before her operation. She was anxious and vulnerable. He sat down and they began to talk. He suggested to her that she have [an imaginative] conversation with her womb. To talk to her womb as a friend. She could thank her womb for making her a mother. To thank it for all her different children who had begun there. The body, mind and spirit of each child had been tenderly formed in that kind darkness. She could remember the different times in her life when she was acutely aware of her own presence, power and vulnerability as a mother. To thank her womb for the gifts and the difficulties. To explain to it how it had become ill and that it was necessary for her continuing life as a mother to have it removed. She was to undertake this intimate ritual of leave-taking before the surgeons came in the morning to take her womb away. She did this ritual with tenderness and warmth of heart. The operation was a great success. Her conversation with her womb changed the whole experience. The power was not with the doctors or the hospital. The experience did not have the clinical, short-circuit edge of so much mechanical and anonymous hospital efficiency. The experience became totally her own, the leave-taking of her own womb.’ (John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Hunger to Belong* [New York: Bantam, 1998] 179-80)

“Predicting the future is really about not being victimized by events,” writes Fr. Shea. “It is taking the leverage away from happenstance and fate and placing it in the courage and creativity of the one suffering. It is about making our experience our own.

“What we [want] are exact timetables and all the details. [...But] this will not be given. And I do not think the apocalyptic predictions of ...Jesus [in today's Gospel] were meant to be exceptions to the radically unknowable future. Rather, I think he was preparing his disciples to understand the *meaning* of their sufferings. They were going to suffer the violent night of a way of thinking and acting that was dying; and [they would be] brought to the morning of a way of thinking and acting that was being born. In this terrible transition they are called to witness to and cling to the transcendent love [of God] that ultimately holds them. **Whatever** happens to them, this is *really* what is happening. [And] there was no one better qualified to tell them this profound truth than Jesus.”⁵

AMEN

1 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 315-316

2 Geoffrey W. Bromily, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985, p. 1348

3 *Lectionary Homiletics*, 2001, p. 20

4 Shea, *ibid.*, p. 317

5 Shea, *ibid.*, pp. 317-318