

PERSEVERING IN FAITH, TRUST, AND LOVE: 33RD SUNDAY C

Jesus is speaking about the future. What his first listeners hear him saying is grim stuff – real doom and gloom. As we listen in to what he says we must ask ourselves how much of his message is meant for us too. Where is the hope in what he says? Is there any hope in what he says?

Jesus is responding to a group from the Fine Art Society of Jerusalem discussing the beauty of the Temple building. They are entranced by the splendour of the edifice and the magnificence of its decorations. But Jesus responds to their pride about the Temple with thundering words. He says that Jerusalem is heading for total destruction and the rest of the world for disaster. This is just what happened to Jerusalem with one exception. When the Roman general Titus destroyed the city and the Temple in the year 70, he ordered that a wall should be left standing for the Jewish people to mourn the loss of their sacred site. That ‘Wailing Wall’ is still there.

The first disaster for the wider world that Jesus warns against is the arrival on the scene of deceivers. They make out that they are saviours, and pretend to know the ultimate secret – when the world will end. Out of sheer fear some people believe them.

It is more difficult to follow the advice of Jesus not to be frightened by wars and revolutions. In a world with stockpiles of nuclear weapons, surely it’s a challenge not to be frightened by the sheer idiocy of some unpredictable leader who wants to launch a nuclear strike which would wipe out a swathe of cities and regions. In the time of Jesus, wars and battles were limited by the weapons available. Today we are feeling threatened with ‘weapons of mass destruction’. They are so lethal that they could end up destroying the whole earth, our home.

Jesus goes on to mention earthquakes, plagues and famines. For thousands of people these are still regular features of life and the causes of indescribable suffering. We cannot measure the extent of human loss on the Richter scale. For all the advances in science and medicine, there are still epidemics of incurable diseases. With the globe getting warmer and warmer, there are more famines than ever before, and there are still thousands and thousands of people going hungry or starving to death. For millions of people such disasters do mean the end, even though they don’t mean the end of the entire world.

Jesus adds that his followers will be persecuted for their beliefs. In fact he never suggests that following him will be painless and bloodless. He suggests rather that their sufferings will give his followers an opportunity to witness to their faith and trust in him. Down the centuries Christians have revered the memory and prayers of those men and women who have valued their faith more than life itself, and who have refused to change their commitment to Christ and the Christian way of life for the sake of their own survival. They have lived the truth of the words of Jesus. They have also lived the pattern of his life, a life that ended with his cruel passion and death.

The last item on the list of Jesus' warnings is betrayal. He warns his followers that they cannot always count on their own families to understand them and support them in their commitment to Christ. This really does sometimes happen. On becoming Christians particular people are shown the door by their very own families, who never speak to them again, and have nothing more to do with them. For becoming Christians they are treated ever afterwards like orphans. Paying this price for their relationship with Christ, then, is a very high price and an extremely painful one.

On coming to the end of this list of possible disasters for persevering in faith, surely we feel that it's time to look for comfort and reassurance. There is comfort in the fact that Jesus has told us before it happens that living our faith in him will at times be very painful. Living among people who do not believe in God, and living among those who sneer and jeer at those who do, is hard to take. It takes much courage to persevere, and the courage that we need to stay faithful is a grace from God, a real blessing.

A poet wanting to portray the blindness of society to the questions that confront us used this image: -

We picnic at the edge of the precipice
With our backs to the abyss.

Jesus asks us to face the abyss, but face it with faith.

Many good people lose their faith when they see the amount of evil and suffering in the world. They cannot observe the pointless suffering of so many and still believe in a God who cares. They cannot look into the eyes of a starving child e.g. and still praise God. They know that no one chooses to die from famine. They know that no one wants to be blown up by a stray bomb or a drone, and yet these things keep happening.

Their questions are our questions too. There are no ready answers to such questions. There are times when all our faith can do is to hang on, to endure. That is the last point Jesus makes today. He has no quick answers either. He just calls on his followers to endure, in spite of all the horror and all the suffering that may come their way.

If we had the answers, our faith wouldn't have to endure. But because the questions are still with us, still unanswered, still unresolved, let us pray for ourselves and one another, for a faith that endures, a faith that perseveres, and a faith that lasts till the very end of the dark night!

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