

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 21:5 - 19 in its biblical context

Jesus is still teaching in the temple area. Some people are speaking about the temple and Jesus warns them that the temple is going to be destroyed. This passage recalls Jesus' earlier statement when he lamented over Jerusalem (Luke 19:43-44a). The people then ask Jesus when and with what sign these things will happen. As we can tell from the way Luke has pictured the people wording this question, the topic of the destruction of the temple and the topic of the end times are one and the same in their minds. For Jesus' contemporaries the end times were the times when God would take decisive action and vindicate God's people by punishing evil and rewarding good. In today's passage we see that the destruction of the temple would be one of the signs that the end times were near.

Jesus speaks of the destruction of the temple and the end times in relationship to each other. As he responds to the people's question he talks not only about the destruction of the temple, but also about the coming of the Son of Man. One of the signs of the end times that Jesus describes is the desolation of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20). After describing this sign, along with the signs that are described in this passage, Jesus says that they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory (Luke 21:27-28). So Luke pictures both Jesus and his contemporaries treating the destruction of the temple and the end times, the coming of the Son of Man, as related events. By the time Luke is writing his Gospel (AD 85) the temple has been destroyed, but the Son of Man has not yet come in glory. So for Luke and his contemporaries, the destruction of the temple and the coming of the Son of Man are two separate topics. In addition, Jesus' followers have suffered severe persecution. Many have died before the coming of the Son of Man. Luke's description of the coming of the end times is influenced by these facts. First Luke has Jesus point out that many will think they are seeing the signs of the imminent coming of the Son of Man, but they will be mistaken. Jesus warns his followers not to be deceived by such false prophets. Jesus also warns his followers that they will suffer persecution. As Jesus describes this terrible persecution, even death, he says that our perseverance will secure us our lives. Jesus now assures his followers that if they remain faithful to him through persecution "not a hair on your head will be destroyed," because there is life after death. The life that his followers will secure by faithfully suffering persecution is not life on earth, but life in the world to come.

While Jesus answers the question about what signs to expect with stock elements found in much apocalyptic literature, he deflects attention from the signs to the time before these final signs. The time before the end is for witnessing, or 'giving testimony'. This is the time of Luke's community and it is our time, too. Rather than calculating the time, cataloguing signs, chasing after those who claim, "I am he," or tracking world events, Jesus prepares his disciples for the sometimes arduous task of bearing witness to him and his way of life. Fidelity to him will cause persecutions, family division, and legal actions against believers. This is the lot of the disciple in any age, both in the present and in the end times.

Reflection

Jesus does not see what others see. The crowd looks upon the beauty of the Temple. Jesus sees when it will be a pile of rubble. The crowd sees wars, earthquakes, famines, etc. as terrifying. Jesus sees them as the beginning of the end. Jesus sees the end of time not as the end of life, but as the time when we will secure our lives. In every case, Jesus sees the immediate happenings in the context of God's eternal plan – a vision which calls us to hope and courage. We are always tempted at this time of to move too quickly to focus on the signs of the end times: this gospel calls us to focus on the promise of the end times.

To be sure, our hope does not lie in a future which is devoid of such frightening events – these catastrophic events will happen. Along with all these terrifying things, good things happen: these things do not signal an immediate end so we have time to prepare; these things happen: these things give all of us an opportunity to testify to Jesus' name and his reign. Jesus himself will give each of us the wisdom we need to speak boldly; and, most importantly, Jesus assures us that he will be the victor. Some will die, yes. Some will be hated, yes. All we need do is persevere – that is, be faithful to our call to follow Jesus – and we “will secure our lives”. Why should we not be terrified? Because Jesus has promised us that if we persevere, we will live. And we know that Jesus always makes good on his promises.

Times of adversity, whether now or in the future, are opportunities in which the wisdom of Jesus and his teachings embolden his followers to testify to him and strengthen them to persevere. The trials and tribulations we face now in our lives are preparation for the end times. As we grow in our readiness to be faithful to the Gospel in this life, we are already choosing our final destiny. Before new life, there must be dying to the old self. We know that Christ is the victor, and those who persevere in their faithfulness will share in the glory of that victory. But the full victory is not yet revealed. We await. We hope.

Questions for Faith-Sharing Groups

- When you hear the phrase *end times*, what do you understand it to mean?
- When you think about Jesus' coming in glory to judge the living and the dead do you want it to happen soon or not? Why?
- What do you need to do to be prepared for the end times?
- What enables you to persevere in your witness of Jesus?
- What enables you to focus on the promise of the Second Coming rather than the signs of its coming?