

You Will Stand

In the name of him who when he had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, sat down at the right hand of God, dear friends in Christ: “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings.” So said one of the disciples to Jesus as the twelve marveled over the grand structures that graced the temple mount in Jerusalem. And they were indeed impressive: imposing buildings constructed of massive stones towering high above their heads, and set on foundations of solid rock that seemed rooted in the very core of the earth. Together they exuded a sense of strength and permanence that filled the disciples with awe. They were certain that these buildings – and presumably the worship and sacrifices that went on within them – would stand forever.

So we can only imagine their jaws dropping in utter horror when Jesus responds that no, these buildings will not stand. “Do you see all this? Not one stone will be left atop another. They will all be thrown down.” The disciples could not begin to comprehend such a terrible thing befalling their beloved temple. It was unthinkable to them that the Lord would allow it. But the prophecy piqued their curiosity; which is why, not long afterward, as they were sitting on the Mount of Olives on the other side of the valley with a panoramic view of Jerusalem laid out before them that they asked Jesus to fill them in on the details. “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”

Jesus’ answer to their query was probably the most disturbing discourse they’d ever heard from their Teacher of three years. Where they had imagined a golden Messianic age of peace, stability, and the triumph of the Jewish way of life, with Jerusalem the capital of all the world, Jesus foretells of torturous times to come. Instead of stability and permanence, they are to look forward to a sea of chaos and confusion: wars, famines, earthquakes – the whole earth in seething turmoil. Jesus told them that the world as they knew it was coming to an end. And instead of riding the coattails of Jesus their Messiah to positions of wealth, honor, and power in the kingdom of God like they anticipated, they were to expect arrest, persecution, and death at the hands of the leaders of the kingdoms of men. In their mission to spread the reign of Christ they would meet not welcome and acceptance; but derision and hatred. Close family members would disown and betray them. And they would have to contend with false prophets claiming to be the Christ who, telling people what their itching ears wanted to hear, would lead many astray.

None of this was what they expected to hear. None of it was what they wanted to hear. And when Jesus closed this discourse by saying, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved”, surely they must have wondered, “Yes; but will that include *me*?” You see, it’s one thing to hear Jesus say “Be on your guard” and “Don’t be anxious” and “Endure to the end”; but how do you do that? When everything I hoped for and imagined turns out to be wrong, and the world I know is literally coming to pieces, and everyone despises me and I’m suffering hardship and persecution because of the name of Christ – *and* knowing full well the inconsistency of my weak and wavering will and my feckless and fearful flesh – *how do I know that I’m going to remain among the faithful?* If even the enormous and seemingly immovable stones of the temple will be thrown down, the disciples must have wondered, how am I going stand? If everything I thought was going to last collapses into the dust, what in the world am I going to stand on?

These questions that must have nagged the disciples ought to concern us as well, for we also live in the times that Jesus was speaking of when he foretold these things. As much as we

long for peace and stability in this world, it consistently fails to deliver. Instead we get earthquakes, fires, floods, droughts, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Every time we fight a war to end all wars, another threat arises immediately afterward. And then we're at war again against a new enemy. We long for economic constancy only to see one financial bubble after another burst, and people's life savings wiped out and fortunes ruined. Though we've beaten some of the age-old killers with our modern medicines, new diseases appear every year that threaten to become pandemic. And only the Lord knows what we're doing to poison our air, our water, and our land with the chemical cocktails that belch forth from smokestacks, tailpipes, and industrial and household sewage lines. The only thing we can really count on in this world is change – change for the worse. Nothing stays the same. Nothing lasts. Nothing works out quite like we thought and hoped it would. The world as we know it is coming to end.

And things aren't any better on the spiritual side of life. Though for the time being in this nation we enjoy relative peace and stability in the Church (at least we're not being actively persecuted – yet) Christians all over the globe know a different reality. Across Africa, the Middle, Near, and Far East, and in other places, our brothers and sisters in the faith daily face losing their homes, their freedom, their livelihoods, and their lives because they bear the name of Christ. One day it may happen here too. In some ways, it's already beginning. But regardless of where we are in the world, we have to contend with all manner of false prophets peddling their phony versions of Christ. They are leading people – sometimes our people, our friends and family members – to everlasting destruction. And if we speak out against them we come under the censure and condemnation of many both within and outside the Church. The situation doesn't promise to get any better. No, Christ our Lord tells us that it's only going to get worse.

And if none of this bothers you or causes you some concern, then either you're not hearing what Jesus is saying, or you don't believe it. He's telling us these things so that we will be alert and on guard. He's telling us this precisely so that we will ask the question, "How am I going to stand and endure to the end?"

You're probably aware that some Christians on the radical fringe of the faith answer this question by stockpiling food, water, weapons, and ammunition, imagining that by so doing they are preparing themselves for the collapse of world order and times of tribulation; but that's only to shift one's hope from one flimsy foundation to another. Others within the Church are erroneously taught by their misguided teachers that they needn't worry about it: before anything really bad happens, all true believers will be whisked away to safety in heaven through an event they call the *rapture*. Never mind that there's nothing even remotely biblical about this teaching. And try telling Christians in Sudan or Nigeria that what their suffering for the faith isn't really bad. Christians who believe this rapture nonsense are placing their hope of enduring on an escape hatch that doesn't exist, and thus they will be unprepared when trial and tribulation do come.

How then shall we stand? How can we be sure that we will endure until the end? Jesus doesn't answer those questions in today's Gospel. And the truth is that even if he had, the disciples would not have understood at the time. But they did later; and the answer they came to – indeed the answer by which they endured to the end – is found in today's reading from Hebrews. There, in the passages immediately before today's lesson, the writer has been explaining that the temple in Jerusalem that the disciples thought was going to last forever (together with its form of worship) was merely a temporary, earthly model of a far greater heavenly reality. And the daily sacrifices that were offered by the priests over and over again could never really take away sins. They were merely prophetic shadows: enactments of something far more substantial and powerful; namely the sacrifice that Jesus, our great high

priest, made when he offered himself on the cross as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world.

In this wide world of constant change and decay in which nothing else can be relied upon, this event, this truth is the one permanent and powerful thing. It's the rock upon which the Church stands. It's what conveys genuine strength to endure to those who trust in it – to those who stand upon it in faith. This sacrifice that Jesus made – its efficacy and infinite worth – was verified by his resurrection and his subsequent exaltation to the right hand of God. His resurrection proves that this is the real thing. And his ascension to the throne of heaven is our guarantee that he is, even now, ruling and reigning over his church until that day he comes again in glory to place all things under the order and perfection of God's kingdom.

This truth – the death of Jesus for sin and his resurrection – is what the disciples stood on as the world as they knew it fell to pieces. It was only forty years after Jesus spoke the words of today's Gospel that Jerusalem was laid waste. The temple along with the rest of the city was flattened – not one stone left atop another, just as Jesus had said. It was a devastating blow to those who still followed the old Jewish faith. And it would have been also to the disciples had they not understood; but by then they did understand. And so for them it was no big deal: who needs the shadow when you have the reality: the thing of substance that casts the shadow? This is what they stood on when they suffered persecution. This is what enabled them to stand when they testified before kings, rulers, and hostile crowds. And trusting in this truth is what gave them the strength to endure through all life's hardships and trials to the end. They have since been received by Jesus into glory where they stand crowned with eternal life. And we will stand with them, if we too endure to the end.

To help ensure that we do endure, the writer of Hebrews gives us specific instructions. He says, "Let us draw near [to God] with a true heart", that is, a heart that recognizes its own sin and weaknesses. A true heart is one that confesses its filth, failures, and faults to the Lord, trusting in his mercy for the sake of Jesus.

The writer continues, "... with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." I'll bet I don't have to tell you that he's speaking of our Baptisms – our Baptisms by which we were united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism is what made the reality of Christ's sacrifice apply to directly and irrevocably to you. It's when your sin was washed away and you were made a pure and holy child of God in Christ, with a clean conscience. I want to emphasize that: when you were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and ever afterward when you revisit your Baptism by confessing your sins, and you hear those words of absolution – that I forgive you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – *you then have no sins to confess*. The slate is wiped clean. It's like you never did anything wrong. That's how thoroughly and completely God forgives you in Christ. Thus your conscience is clean.

And living with our "baptismally" clean consciences, the writer enjoins us to "Hold fast to the confession of our hope." I explained in last week's message that Christian hope is trust in God's promises that have not yet been fulfilled. Our hope is in the resurrection and the life of the world to come. That's where our focus for the future ought to be, rather than on the fading and failing things of this age. And as we hold this hope, we are reminded that God is faithful. He keeps his promises. Just as he fulfilled his promise to send us a Savior from sin, so he will also keep his promise to bring us to glory with him.

And while we wait for that grand and glorious day, we are exhorted by the writer of Hebrews to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works”. He refers to our life together here in the Church, and how the family of God cares for its own. By the love God gives us in Christ and by the working of his Spirit, we are given the will and desire to love one another. And this is a desire that comes from within, from our new natures. It’s not brought about by brow beating, making demands, or shaming others into doing what’s right. Actions taken under such motivations aren’t love, they’re slavery. We’ve been set free in Christ. And as free people we gladly and willingly look out for one another, sharing our goods and blessings with those in need, and praying for and assisting each other in every way possible.

And last the writer admonishes us to “not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some”. He refers, of course, to our gatherings at the house of God for Christian worship, for this is where the faith to endure is fed and strengthened with the Word of Christ, with the gifts of his Spirit, and with the very body and blood that Jesus sacrificed for us on the cross. Standing with the Church is to stand on Christ and his accomplished work. The person who makes it a habit of staying away from public worship is proudly declaring, “I can go it alone. I have what I need. I don’t need the gifts that Christ gives in the church to face the trials and temptations of this age. I can stand on my own.” It’s a foolish boast; one that shows no understanding of the weakness of the flesh, and contempt for the words of Christ who warns us of the dangers we will face as we come to the end of this age.

For the threats are very real, and in this ever changing world they will continue to come at us: calamities, persecutions, false prophets, betrayals – all becoming worse and more intense as the Day draws near. But even more real and infinitely durable and reliable is the accomplished work of Christ for us on the cross. This is what we stand on together in the Church. And standing on it you cannot fall. You will endure this life’s trials. And you will stand with the saints in glory, through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!