

Caution: Danger Ahead

In the name of him who offered for all time the single sacrifice for sin, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel begins with Jesus delivering some very disturbing news to his disciples. The action picks up where we left off last Sunday. It's now late on Wednesday of Holy Week. For the past several days, Jesus has been engaged in a series of vicious debates with his adversaries on the temple courts. He's won every one of them, pretty much mopping the floor with those foolish enough to challenge him. He's shown time and again that they understand nothing about the true faith, that their entire approach to religion – what with its emphasis on what *we* do for God rather than what *God* does for us – is backward and can only lead to spiritual ruin. But they've dug in intractably to their misguided position. So now he's done with them – *and* with the elaborate temple they take such pride in. While they stand seething in silent fury plotting their murderous revenge, Jesus storms out of the temple for the last time. He's not coming back. His disciples follow behind him like little ducklings.

It's as they're exiting that one of them comments to Jesus on the imposing grandeur of the temple and its surrounding complex of massive and highly ornate structures. "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings." They really did exude a sense of permanence and majesty. It was designed to be awe inspiring, and it was. It was a monument to the ingenuity and skill of the architects and craftsmen who constructed it. But Jesus replies, "You see all this, all these great buildings? Impressed by them are you? I tell you the whole place will be thrown down. Not one stone will be left atop another." And it's key that we understand this: this temple, so magnificent in appearance, was a physical manifestation of the false religion of those who ran the place. They were extolling the glory and worth of human works, all those things people do that look so good and righteous and holy. They are works that people imagine God is pleased with and that they think will endure forever. But no, the Lord counts them as worse than worthless. They are obstacles to repentance and receiving the Gospel of salvation. They must be thrown down together with the stones of the temple in which they were so highly and so wrongheadedly praised by men.

It is in the mind of Jesus to build a new and lasting temple, a temple built not by human hands of impressive stones, but built by God of human stones. To be sure in just a few days he will lay what will be the foundation of this new temple when he offers his life for sin on the cross. That's the solid truth upon which the Church he will build will stand.

But, of course, at this point the disciples understand none of this. It won't be until after Jesus' death and resurrection that their minds will even be open to such things. So for the moment they're extremely alarmed about what he's just said about the temple's destruction. It doesn't match at all how they imagine the future. No, like every other Jew of the time they thought that this city, this temple, would be the very center of the Messiah's reign on earth. They were expecting Jesus to use his mighty power to overthrow all their enemies and establish Jerusalem as the capitol of a new world empire, far surpassing the reach and might of Rome. They were looking forward to what the prophets foretold: an endless era of peace and prosperity with the glory and wealth of the nations steadily pouring in – tribute to Jesus, the messianic king. And as the twelve men closest to him, they imagined that they would be his chief cabinet ministers. Turns out they were going to be his ministers all right; but not at all like they thought.

Anyway, they're just busting to find out more about this. So when they sit down with Jesus on the Mount of Olives they ask him, "When will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" In his response Jesus doesn't give them

the precise specifics they're looking for. He knows what their expectations are. And he knows how wrong their thinking is. So he begins to explain to them in general terms what the future holds in store for the world at large and especially for those who confess his name. And it's important that we pay attention to what Jesus says here too. Like the disciples, we are susceptible to having false expectations concerning the future. In some circles of Christendom it's taught that coming to Christ means the end of all problems: You can have your best life now. Give Jesus a try and see if your life doesn't improve. In other circles it's taught that humanity as a whole is steadily improving. As we increase with our scientific knowledge and technology, we are also becoming wiser, more moral, more compassionate. I mean, we got rid of slavery a while back; and now we're on the cusp of getting rid of racism, sexism, and every kind of whatever it is we don't like-ism there may be. It's only a matter of time before we solve the problems that cause poverty and create wars. With each generation, we're getting better. And in the not too distant future, with the influence of the church's message the brotherhood of man and God's love for all, we'll finally get there. We'll have heaven on earth – or at least something pretty close to it.

It's an appealing thought. It's also completely wrong. As Jesus explains to his disciples – and to us – what the future holds is not steady advancement toward some highly desirable golden age, but increasing darkness as sin runs its course through human hearts and this world in its death throes comes to its final end. Jesus advises caution because there's danger ahead.

And it's worth noting that the first danger he warns us of is being led astray. "Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will deceive many." This makes sense. Because we are saved through faith in certain truths about who Jesus is and his work of salvation for us, Satan's main goal is to somehow divert us from those truths, to get us to believe something else that destroys or undermines the Gospel's power to save. The history of the Church proves Satan has been a very busy guy. Many false christs *have* made their appearance. There have been larger numbers of misguided teachers who took the true Christ and made false claims about him, thus making the Lord himself into a false Christ. It goes on even today. And this is why we stress strict adherence to true doctrine, and why also we have to point out errors whenever we see them. Many don't understand this. They think it's unloving or unkind to criticize someone else's religious point of view. "Why can't we be more accepting of everyone like Jesus was?" Um, no. No one who has actually read the Gospels can say that. Jesus was absolute death on false doctrine. He accepted sinners, yes, but he roundly condemned false teachers and their teachings. And he wasn't bothered a bit if they were offended by his rebuke. The truth of Christ sets people free. It gives them eternal life. False teaching about Christ enslaves people and brings them to eternal death and damnation. And because Satan continues to assault the truth with his lies, keeping watch over our doctrine has got to be job number one precisely so that we are not led astray.

From there Jesus goes on to warn his disciples about other dangers that lie ahead. These will affect all of humanity: man-made disasters in the form of wars and conflicts, and natural disasters in the form of earthquakes and famines. These, Jesus says, are not to alarm us. They are instead the beginning of birth pains. They are to be constant reminders to us that this world is passing away along with everything in it. They tell us that we have no permanent home here, no permanent peace. They cause us to look ahead with longing to that time when Jesus will usher in a new heaven and a new earth. And they remind us to be prepared at all times – clinging to Christ in repentance for sin and true faith in him – for we don't know the hour of our death or the time of his return.

In the final section of today's Gospel, Jesus returns to speaking to those who belong to him in the Church. He tells the disciples not to expect a warm reception by the people of this

world or their leaders – both religious and secular. “They will deliver you to councils, you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them.” The Bible’s Book of Acts describes these things in detail, how these words of Jesus were fulfilled already in the first generation of believers. And as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit gave them the words to speak when their trials came. They are recorded for us so that we too will know what to say if and when comes a time when we may face persecution for the sake of Christ and his Gospel. With our present religious freedoms, that may seem to be a remote possibility for us in this country. But as I’m sure you’re aware, in many places throughout the globe our fellow Christians are being persecuted. Many of them are bearing witness to Christ with their words at great peril to themselves; and some are bearing witness to their faith in Christ by their deaths. In the first and second centuries of the Christian era that made a powerful impression on unbelievers. It’s said that the Church was built on the blood of the martyrs because it was watching believers face torture and death rather than renounce their faith that made their persecutors wonder what is it that these folks in trust that makes them so unafraid. In finding out, many of them were converted. And we pray that the Lord will accomplish the same thing in our day wherever our fellow believers are being made to suffer for the name of Jesus. We pray that we too will have the faith to hold fast to Jesus should such outward persecution come to us.

But not all such trouble comes to us from the outside. Some of the most difficult to deal with comes from members of our own families. Jesus warns, “Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against their parents and have them put to death.” This is exactly what happened in the early days of the Christian Church. Especially among the Jews, if a member of the family converted to Christianity, they were disowned. If it was a time of persecution, they were turned over to the authorities and threatened with death. And of course the great danger here is that they used family relationships and familial love as a form of leverage. You can imagine parents saying to their son or daughter, “If you love us, you will renounce your faith in Christ.” When forced by a loved one into a corner like that, it’s awfully tempting to choose to keep a human relationship over one with the Lord.

Now, in our day, unless you’re a Muslim converting to Christianity, there’s little danger of a family member having you killed for confessing the name of Jesus. And yet we still do see family relationships used as a wedge to drive believers from Jesus – like when a Christian marries an atheist, an agnostic, or someone who practices a different religion and then is pressured to stop practicing the true faith. It happens also when a new convert, who grew up in a non-Christian home, is pressured by their unbelieving family members to choose between them and Jesus. It places them in a difficult position. But it also makes things starkly clear: to allow a human relationship with some member of the family to take higher priority than your relationship with Jesus is to make an idol of that person – and that is a deadly danger indeed.

And that is why Jesus warns us about it and about the other dangers we will face as we continue in this world. It’s also he why continues to strengthen our faith in him with his Word and Spirit through the ministry of the Church that he founded upon the indestructible truths of his Gospel and his work of salvation for us. The world hated him and put him to death for speaking the truth. And Jesus has told us that we too will be hated by all for his name’s sake. But despite the world’s hatred and murderous ways, Jesus rose from the dead. He defeated sin and death. And by holding fast to him we too will endure in the face of the world’s hatred and its multifaceted dangers. And by enduring to the end, we will be saved by Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!