

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 28
Year C

Malachi 4:1-2a
Psalm 98
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

When Jesus spoke the words recorded in our reading from Luke's Gospel, He was looking to the future. Scholars have debated whether Jesus was talking about events that would happen during the lifetime of those who heard Him speak that day, or that Jesus was referring to the end of time. Perhaps there are evidences of both. What we do know is that, by the time Luke actually wrote his account, during the last quarter of the first century, all of these events had already taken place.

The Temple that stood during the time of Jesus was a reconstruction that Herod the Great began in 19BCE and, while the actual construction work on the Temple itself was completed in a year and a half, work continued on Temple Mount until the 60s, almost eighty years after Herod began. It has been stated in many contemporary accounts that the exterior glowed so brightly in the sunshine that one could not look at it as it was covered with gold. Obviously, no expense was spared in creating a magnificent structure. Thus, when the people in our reading today were commenting on the beauty of the Temple, they were only acknowledging what everyone saw.

Jesus, however, tells them that this glorious building will be destroyed. Whenever anyone foretells a great catastrophe, people want to know when it will happen and how they might know in advance that that time has arrived. The question Jesus is asked focuses on this thought.

Looking at our reading and the verses which follow, we see not only the destruction of the Temple being forecast, but also the destruction of the entire city of Jerusalem. Additionally, Jesus tells those listening that wars, famines, and persecutions will also happen. As we read in Acts and in the works of the Jewish historian, Josephus, all of these things happened, including the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. What, therefore, does all of this have to do with us in the twenty-first century? If all Jesus foretold has already happened, is there anything left for us to seek? Why did Luke write this story?

If the point of the story is to give the readers a history lesson, Luke would not need to put the words into the mouth of Jesus. But he did have Jesus relate this story, so there must be something in it for us. Jesus knew that, throughout history, people would come proclaiming that they had a unique relationship with God and, therefore, everyone should follow them. Jesus also knew there would be times when the church would need to be revived. In addition to a church that was more focused on its survival than in spreading the gospel message needing change, many would come with the message that they knew what that change needed to be and, if we would but follow them, all would be well. "Do not be deceived," Jesus says.

As Richard Rohr says, “if the only way we can motivate people to live a life of goodness is to talk about the end times, they are not motivated at all.” Fear is not a motivator in the church. Those who focus on all of the prophecies of the end offer nothing to live by. But Jesus is calling us to live productive lives. We are to occupy – to be active – as we await the end of time. Yes, that time will come, but we should not focus our efforts on preparing for it, but in doing the work God has given us to do.

Yes, the world around us looks bad. Yes, all of us will die. All those wonderful things we have collected and treasure – my books, perhaps treasured knickknacks, or anything else we admire – they will pass away. In the grand scheme of things, they are not important. At the end of our lives, will we treasure things, or something else? My guess is that we will treasure relationship – the people we have touched in our lives.

God is asking us to look at our priorities. We can be like those around Jesus admiring the beauty of a structure, or we can follow His commands and share God’s love with others. The choice is ours.