

Sometimes I really feel for the first disciples of Jesus, I often identify with them, especially when they get things wrong. Our gospel reading today, from Luke 21, begins with some of the disciples make some fairly uncontroversial comments about the splendour of the temple in Jerusalem. I think they're actually attempting to diffuse a tense situation, but I'm absolutely certain that the response they get from Jesus is not what they expected.

I've found sometimes that, in tense situations, making an innocuous remark can calm things down a bit. Occasionally, though, it doesn't work. Instead of calming things down it releases an outpouring of frustration. I think that's what is happening in this passage. It was a tense time, you see, for the disciples, and especially for Jesus. This episode takes place in the final week of Jesus life, it occurs between his triumphal entry to Jerusalem and, on the Friday of that week, his execution. At the beginning of the week Jesus had stirred up the temple authorities by driving the money changers and merchants out of the temple courts. On the following days he was teaching daily in the temple – and being interrogated by some of the religious leaders, who were trying to trap him into error and discredit him. Luke tells us, at the beginning of chapter 22, that already the chief priests and the teachers of the law were plotting to have him killed. So, what we read in this passage is maybe two days out from the betrayal, trial and execution of Jesus. It's a very tense time. Our reading begins:

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus replied, ⁶ “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

For the disciples, this reply would have been deeply shocking. The temple was massive, 500 metres by 400 metres in size; you could put St Peter's Cathedral inside it twice and have room to spare. The stones which the disciples speak of, were actually huge blocks up to 30m in length, 12m wide and 10m high. The gates of the temple were plated in silver and gold. The temple symbolised all that Israel stood for, its history, its faith, its culture and its hopes. The disciples would have been deeply disturbed by what Jesus had said. When they've recovered sufficiently, they ask:

"Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

The question draws from Jesus a long and impassioned speech which extends to the end of the chapter, and which moves back and forth, between warnings about the longer term future and the immediate future. His words are full of grief for Jerusalem, and for the world he came to save – the city and the world which, largely are rejecting him, and in doing so rejecting God's way of salvation, and thus choosing, by default, to continue the path of human destructiveness to which history, before the time of Jesus, and since, bears witness. That human capacity for evil will be visited on Jerusalem and the wider world, and his disciples, and people today, including Christians in various times and places.

Jesus doesn't immediately answer the disciples' question about when these things will happen, and what the signs will be. Instead, he begins with a warning about false messiahs. There were plenty of these in and around the time of Jesus. The Book of Acts, for example, records one named Theudas, another called Judas the Galilean and also an unnamed Egyptian, all of whom seemed to have gathered substantial followings. Most of these messianic pretenders came to prominence

shortly after the time of Jesus, when the Jewish people were becoming desperate to be free of the domination of Rome. Desperate times create desperate people, and desperate people tend to look for a saviour. We've seen this also in our own times, perhaps most notably in the rise of Adolf Hitler in the midst of the despair that was 1930's Germany. In our reading Jesus warns his followers that the times are going to become desperate. He warns them, especially in the latter part of chapter 21, that dreadful things will take place in the next 40 years or so in Jerusalem, and he urges them not to be led astray by those who would set themselves up as the saviour of the nation. Unfortunately, I'm fairly sure that over the next few years times are going to get more desperate in Australia, and as they do, we as Christians, will also need to beware of those who peddle cheap hope. Christians do have a hope – a sure hope – but it is a hope that, while guaranteed by the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, is won through the suffering of the cross, and what's more, it is a hope discovered through a sometimes costly following of the way of the cross. We have a sure hope, a hope founded on Christ's death for us, a hope discovered in authentically following him - but there is nothing cheap about it.

The next warning Jesus gives has to do with '*wars and insurrections*'. This is almost certainly a reference to the Jewish revolt against Rome which took place from 66AD – 70AD. It was a revolt that concluded with the siege and final conquest of Jerusalem both of which caused dreadful suffering and, in the end, the destruction of the temple. Those huge blocks of stone were overturned, the gold and silver plated gates were torn down, the sanctuary desecrated.

Jesus goes on to warn that '*there will be earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues, and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven*'. Here he's talking about natural disasters or natural phenomena which might cause

his followers to lose faith. We know a lot more about these things today than people did in the time of Jesus – we know, for example, that plagues and famines are usually not natural disasters at all, they're the result of human greed or apathy or wilful blindness – but when they happen to us, these things can shake our faith.

Finally, Jesus comes back to the more immediate future.

“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³ This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴ So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance, ¹⁵ for I will give you words^[c] and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

These words foreshadow many of the events of the Book of Acts. There we find the infant church being persecuted as soon as it starts to threaten local power structures. Peter and John are arrested and brought before the same court that had ordered Jesus to be crucified – and, as Jesus suggested, it proves an opportunity to testify. Warned by the court not to speak of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, Peter replies: *‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.’* (Acts 4.20)

In the concluding verses of our passage Jesus warns that the threats will become more dire:

¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all because of my

name. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Again, the testimony of the Book of Acts bears this out. Stephen, a deacon in the early church, is stoned to death in a persecution of Christians led by Saul, later (after his Damascus Road experience) to become St Paul. We're told in Acts 8 that 'On that day a great persecution arose against the church and they were all scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, except for the Apostles.' (Acts 8.1). Acts 12 records the execution of James, the brother of Jesus, at the hands the puppet king Herod, and the imprisonment of St Peter, and so it goes on.

If we try to sum up the message of all this, I think Jesus is warning his disciples, and warning us today, that nothing in this life is permanent, nothing will give us the security we long for. The walls of the temple symbolised stability and security – if they can be destroyed, the disciples would have thought, what hope is there for us?

And if we're liable to be persecuted and put in jail on account of our faith, how will we survive? And if we can't rely on family or friends because they might betray us on account of our faith, where will we go, who can we trust. And then there's the threat of death. Christians in the early church were sometimes put to death on account of their faith – as are Christians today in some parts of the world.

Modern disciples are not immune from these trials. Think of Christians in the eastern part of Ukraine who, four years ago, were like us, putting their faith in their home ownership and superannuation, and their families, only to have much or all of that ripped out from underneath them by Vladimir Putin's invasion.

So, what will give us the security and permanence that we need, in the face of suffering, loss, persecution and even death? The answer comes in one word in the last few verses of our passage. There, Jesus tells the disciples, '*Some of you will be put to death*' but then he goes on to say, '*Not a hair on your head will perish, by your endurance you will gain your souls*'

The key here is the word, 'endurance' – '*by your endurance you will save your souls*'. Jesus is talking about persevering in faith. There may come times when the only thing we have left to cling to is faith in the one who, on the cross defeated even death, and rose triumphant. Everything may be swept away, all that we depend on, all that we hold dear, but if we remain steadfast in faith, we will gain our lives. And if we are to be steadfast in faith, we must know what we believe, we must give time and effort to strengthen faith, because the hard truth is that, in the end, it's all we have!