A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT, November 16, 2025.
23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28-C by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

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

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem just before Passover when thousands of Jews from all over the country came to celebrate this feast of God liberating them from slavery in Egypt.

Jerusalem was a busy, multicultural city with narrow streets packed with people and filed with tensions and conflicts. If you've seen the video series called The Chosen, which depicts the story of the Bible, you may have seen and felt the many levels of conflict in the city. There were tensions between the wealthy and the poor. Religious conflicts, like the Pharisees arguing with the Sadducees. Some folks were passionately committed to their Jewish identity, and a few Jews worked for the Roman government to collect taxes from their own people. Roman soldiers walked the streets looking for troublemakers and there were Jewish Zealots who were looking for opportunities to attack the Romans. And there were always shopkeepers, traders and visitors from all over the world who came to Jerusalem to buy and sell their wares.

When Jesus arrived in this bustling city, he immediately went to the temple to worship, and then began talking with the crowds who gathered to listen to him. Jesus knew, but the crowds didn't know, that on this visit to Jerusalem, he would be killed. This would be one of his last opportunities to speak to the crowds. He wanted to prepare both his disciples and the crowds for the challenging days which would be coming.

Jesus heard some folks talking about the beautiful stones and ornaments in the temple. It is not surprising that people were in awe of the temple. At that time it was the largest religious worship space in the world. The stones were edged with gold. And outside the temple was the largest marketplace in Jerusalem. So, it was both the symbolic and literal center of Jewish worship and life. Yet this Temple was a source of divided opinions. Why?

About 20 years before the birth of Christ, the Roman Empire conquered the region of Judea and appointed Herod "King of the Jews" in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Herod was a cruel tyrant who ruled with arbitrary power. He used secret police to monitor and report how the people spoke about him and then took vengeance on his detractors. He executed one of his wives and some of his children, as well as many of his opponents. Out of jealousy he ordered the killing of all the male children in Bethlehem under the age of three, hoping to kill baby Jesus, who the Wisemen told him had been born King of the Jews.

For Herod to appear all powerful he wanted to please his base of Jewish people in Jerusalem. He also wanted to get the approval of his superiors in Rome. So, to do both things, he embarked on a massive building project in Jerusalem to double the size of the Temple. It was the largest construction project in the 1st Century BCE. It was financed by heavy taxes levied on the Jewish people. It was named Herod's Temple, obviously built to the glory of Herod, more than the glory of God. Do you see why the Jewish people had mixed feelings about this temple?

While the people were admiring the beauty, power, security and wealth symbolized by the temple, Jesus wanted them to realize that Empires come and go throughout history. Temples and buildings come and go. Jesus wanted to remind them not to put their trust in or seek their security from either the Roman Empire or Herod's Temple. He wanted them to put their trust in God who created all things and who will ultimately bring God's kingdom on earth as in heaven.

Jesus must have shocked the temple admirers when he said, “In the coming days, all these magnificent, gold trimmed stones and the inspiring architecture of this temple will be destroyed and demolished. Not one stone will be left on another.”

After a stunned silence, someone asked: “When will this happen? What will be the warning signs, so we know when to escape this destruction?” As he often did, Jesus did not answer their question directly. His disciples would have remembered that he often said, “We do not know the times and the seasons.” All we know for certain is that dramatic positive and negative changes have continued to happen throughout human history.

Then Jesus warned people to be careful not to be led astray by false messiahs who claim be able to protect and save people. As Garth illustrated in his sermon last Sunday, in every generation there are religious and political leaders who claim to be able to save and protect people. Jesus warns the people of his time and of every generation, to be very careful to discern who is trustworthy and who is not.

Jesus continued to warn the people about what would be coming. He said, when you see and hear of violent wars within and between nations, do not be terrified, because these things don’t mean the end of the world is coming immediately. There will be many wars, there will be earthquakes, famines and plagues and ecological disasters. And some of you will be betrayed by family and friends, you may be arrested and persecuted, forced into prison, brought before kings and judges because of your commitment to telling the truth and being my followers.

Again, these words of Jesus must have shocked and shaken all who were listening. Some of the crowd might have walked away, shaking their heads in anger and disbelief. I wonder how you and I might have responded if we had been there listening to these disturbing words of Jesus?

Historians tells us that just 40 years after Jesus spoke these words, the Roman armies came to violently squelch a Jewish rebellion in Jerusalem. They attacked and destroyed much of the city, including ripping down all the stone walls of Herod’s temple. Almost nothing was left of the great Temple.

As we look over the history of the human race, we see that Jesus was simply telling the truth about the rise and fall of nations, the human and natural disasters that would assault people and the world, about the hardships people would face. We will weep and lament at the pain, the injustices, the losses, the things that are not right. But, Jesus says, don’t be surprised. Accept the reality that problems will always be with us in this life.

Fortunately, Jesus also has words of hope and guidance for us and for every generation in this haunting scenario. When we are tempted to complain to God and to each other about our frustrations and anger with the problems around us, Jesus says to us, Yes, I know and I weep with you about all the problems, all the pain and injustice, the hunger and sickness and poverty. And, in these horrific situations, I’m giving you the opportunity to join me in fulfilling God’s mission to bring hope, healing and love into the mess in which you are living. The way Jesus said it in today’s Gospel was: the problems around you “will give you the opportunity to testify.”

What does it mean to testify. Someone who testifies in court swears to tell the truth about what they have seen and heard. So, when we live in the midst of problems, God has sent us there to tell others, by our words and actions, what we have seen and heard about how God is right there with us, inviting us,

empowering us to demonstrate the love of God in the midst of the chaos, by loving our neighbors in little and big ways.

Jesus says don't try to plan ahead what you will say or do. You can't manage or plan how God wants you to respond. God is in charge, not you. You have to listen for and trust God's Spirit to show you what to say and do in each moment.

We need to remember that God is always working through all kinds of people in every place on this planet, to bring hope and healing and help into situations of great pain and need. Look at all the little people, organizations and institutions who worked together to provide food this past week for people in our country who could not afford to eat and live without help. Yes, we have a mess of huge problems in our nation, but in the middle of the mess, God inspired people to act with compassion for our hungry neighbors.

Donating food, as we have done consistently in this parish for many years, is one little way of testifying that God is still at work in this world through people who are demonstrating compassion for neighbors who are hungry and in need of help. No act of compassion is ever wasted in God's economy. The little acts of kindness, smiling, listening, connecting, encouraging, giving are all part of the larger compassion of God working through ordinary little people to bring hope and help in the middle of despairing situations.

Jesus gives one final message. Don't ever give up on your God given purpose and mission in life, regardless of the horrific circumstances you may experience. Just keep on telling the truth and living with love, trusting that "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Paul said the same thing in today's reading: "Do not be weary in doing what is right."

If we are honest, we have to ask Jesus, how can we keep enduring through the exhaustion, the fatigue, the constant frustrations and roadblocks of relentless, overwhelmingly difficult circumstances? Down through the centuries, God has sustained exhausted Christians in difficult situations by meeting them as they opened themselves God's Spirit through at least three spiritual practices and disciplines.

The 1st is Prayer. The truth is, we can't keep loving in the face of violence and hostility without God's help. As a friend of ours often said, "some days I just run out of nice." And that is true for all of us. Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to be the divine power of love and wisdom and strength bubbling up within us even in very difficult and overwhelming situations. And daily, constant prayer and meditation is how we tap into God's Spirit of love, wisdom, and strength that helps us endure in our life mission of love.

The 2nd sustaining spiritual practice is Reading the Bible, especially the Gospels. Did you know that Ghandi read from his Hindu Scriptures and read from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount every day? He said that he needed to keep the words of Jesus and his Hindu Scriptures before him to ground and strengthen him to keep on working for justice through non-violence for over 40 years. We also need to keep reading the words of Jesus daily if we want to keep practicing the love of Jesus over our lifetimes.

The 3rd sustaining spiritual practice is Community. We can't sustain a life of love in the face of great obstacles and challenges without a community to support and challenge us. We need to be inspired and encouraged by others and we need to be sources of inspiration and encouragement for others. Who are the people, the groups with whom you talk regularly to keep encouraging and strengthening you to keep enduring in living the Jesus way of love no matter what the circumstances?

Let us close our eyes and be still with God:. What thoughts have been stirred up in you as we've reflected on what Jesus said in today's Gospel?...

In what specific little or big ways might God be inviting you to show and tell people how the hope filled presence of God's Love at work among us, even in the midst of struggles?...

Given the draining anxiety that haunts our society and world right now, what specific spiritual resources might be helpful for you to use this week, to ground you in God and give you the sustaining strength, hope and love you need to continue to live the Jesus way of love during this season of your life?...

O Jesus, in the middle of all the anxieties and conflicts that surround us, help us this week to be "instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen." (BCP p.833)