

“All Things Will Pass”

(Luke 21.5-19)

Grant Bullen

Introduction

When we lived in New York in 2001, Kathryn and I really loved the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre. They were spectacular buildings... even with their own subway station, so you'd get out and walk directly into this wonderland of fabulous shops... all incredibly glitzy. And then the buildings stretched up and up... We were even lucky enough one day to be taken to the 'Windows on the World' restaurant on the top floor... and it was just as it sounds... all glass and this amazing view over Manhattan. Hannah had never come with us, so she jumped at the chance to go with a visiting uncle – a last minute decision, but they just made it to the observation deck for the last viewing session of the day. The day was September 10th 2001... or as the Americans say in their back-to-front way... 9/10... Fabulous buildings! So impressive!

In today's gospel, the disciples are so impressed with the size and grandeur of the Temple. *'Wow, look at the size of those stones... and all that gold... the way it shimmers in the sun. Surely this IS the house of OUR God!'* But Jesus turns to them and says, *'Take a good look at these buildings... for the day will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down! All of it will be reduced to rubble.'*

Threat

But it's not enough to prophesy the Temple in ruins. He then proceeds to paint a future of nightmarish proportions... and it's quite a list... war, insurrection, earthquakes, famines, plagues... and dreadful portents in the skies! And there's more, particularly for those who follow *his* name – persecution, arrest, trial, betrayal and execution. It's a scary world he's predicting.

It's frightening... although not unfamiliar to us... He *could* be listing our fears here and now in 2016 – terrorism, climate change, economic collapse, war and instability everywhere,

floods of refugees... and now Donald Trump as American president!! (Talk about dreadful portents in the heavens!)

These *are* unstable times! Things we thought would last forever are collapsing. The old institutions (including the church) are failing. And with them go our old certainties... our old securities... the 'things' we thought we could rely on. So much change – the old world we knew our way around, is being swept away. Interestingly, despite what lots of commentators say, the vote for Trump is *not* actually a vote for change... but rather a desperate desire to go back to a more certain world... *where men were men and women were women... where everyone's a bible-believing Christian...* back to that old world where you knew where you stood. *'Let's make America great again!'* From our distance we're tempted to mock, but with a bit of reflection, most of us could find similar feelings in ourselves. *'If only we could go back to a reliable and certain world again!'*

Rapid and continuous change such as we've experienced for several decades now, *does* unsettle us. Our natural response is fear and anxiety. You can hear the quiver in the voices of the disciples in the gospel, *'Teacher, when is this going to happen and how will we know it's coming?'* It's not an uncommon voice in us these days... *'Where will all this end? What will become of us?'*

Our doorway into today's gospel – which at first glance might have seemed strange and inaccessible – is our fear... our communal/societal fear, not just our own personal anxieties. Having opened the lid on that instability, what does Christ want to say to us? What does our faith have to say? How *do* we live in such uncertain times? Is there anything resembling good news here?

All Things Will Pass

First we need to hear, *"All WILL be thrown down"*... even though it doesn't sound terribly comforting. Like other teachers from the great world religions, Christ Jesus teaches *impermanence... transience...* what is commonly summarised as *'all things will pass'*.

All things will pass – there is nothing that’s permanent... nothing that’s forever, except God alone. Everything (but God) will fade and fall. Everything! And so all the trust and hope we place in ‘things’, in institutions and in certainties (cultural, political economic and religious)... all of that is misplaced and illusory. *“All WILL be thrown down”*...

Trust and Hope in God

But... we *can* trust in God...

Christ says, *‘When you see all these things, don’t be terrified’*... or as Eugene Peterson translates it, *‘keep your head and don’t panic.’* Why??? *“For these things must take place”*... or Eugene Peterson again, *“This is routine history...”* All of this is inevitable... it’s how history evolves.

And all of this is in God’s hands. That’s why the faith says we can trust and not be afraid. Today’s gospel is getting us ready for Advent... and that particular Advent hope... that God is Lord of all history. And the day will come when God brings all life to a just and merciful fulfilment. We hear this faith expressed in Peterson’s superb translation of Psalm 98...

*“Sing to GOD a brand-new song.
He’s made a world of wonders!
He rolled up his sleeves,
He set things right.
³ He remembered to love us
—indefatigable love.
⁴ Shout your praises to GOD, everybody!
Let loose and sing! Strike up the band!
⁵ Round up an orchestra to play for GOD,
Add on a hundred-voice choir.
⁷ Let the sea and its fish give a round of applause,
With everything living on earth joining in.
⁸ Let ocean breakers call out, “Encore!”
And mountains harmonize the finale—
⁹ A tribute to GOD when he comes,
When he comes to set the earth right.
He’ll straighten out the whole world,
He’ll put the world right, and everyone in it.”*

There is no need to be afraid – God has ALL of this in hand.

Enduring

Knowing that, trusting that... we can hang on... keep living well... even in the toughest times.

And so today's gospel ends with Christ Jesus calling us to endurance.

"By your endurance you will gain your souls." (NRSV)

"Staying with it – that's what is required. Stay with it to the end. You won't be sorry; you'll be saved." (The Message)

There is no need to be afraid – God has ALL of this in hand.

I can't leave this sermon without a word of encouragement to those of you who've decided to open yourself to the Spirit's work of transformation... to walk the journey of faith... that Paschal journey where we leave the old life and grow into the maturity of Christ.

This way of faith is also a scary road. It too involves leaving behind the old certainties and securities... allowing the bastions of the old life to crumble and collapse. And it too is an arduous journey; often without clear guide-posts to show us the way... Often we travel in darkness and fear. The voice of Christ speaks to you...

'Staying with it – that's what is required. Stay with it to the end. You won't be sorry; indeed you'll find your soul... your true and abiding self.'