

The Martin Luther School Building Project

Fundraising for a worthy cause

In thankfulness to those who have gone before us

And in responsibility to those who have come after

The church buildings here at Bethlehem: a sign of stability

To the glory of God and service to human beings

But what if

After a fundraising presentation a representative from the council gets up

And says, Not one stone will be left on another

The whole thing will be demolished

This is a mild version of what happened to the disciples

They had been with Jesus in the temple

They had just heard Jesus praise the widow

Who gave her last money to the temple treasury

And then at the beginning of today's chapter we hear these words:

As [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

The temple for Jesus' disciples would have been the symbol of stability

The place that stood at the centre of their life of faith

It was the place a festal gathering, the place of sacrifice

The religious and political centre of the nation.

What's more, Jesus had called the temple his Father's house

He had cleansed the temple of its impurity – casting out the moneychangers

He had praised the widow for her offering

But now he says that the whole thing will be destroyed.

If there is not stability in the holy house of God

Then where is there stability?

You know that in our tradition we define the word 'God'

As that which we put our trust and hope in

As that which we fear losing most

As that which, we could say today, gives us stability

And a sure foundation in life

We try to find stability in all sorts of things
Our family, our finances, even our faith, insofar as we think it's *our* work.
And yet, perhaps as we know especially this year
None of these things are a sure foundation: *none of these things are God*

But today I proclaim to you the Good News:
Jesus comes to us in the instability of this world
And speaks to us his word which will not pass away.
He speaks his word that brings us nothing less than the forgiveness of sins
And life with God now and forever
A life that draws us into love for each other
Watch for him, he is coming to you
His word will give for you a sure foundation, it will give life

OK, back to the reading
Just after Jesus spoke of the destruction of the temple
We hear these words: **When [Jesus] was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?'**
These disciples: they are the first ones that Jesus called
You can read about this in the first chapter of Mark
They want a timeline: perhaps like we'd want one regarding Bethlehem
But listen to how the text goes on: **Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray.'**
More important than the timing of the destruction of the temple
Is recognising Jesus, and not being led to put our trust in false gods

Chapter 13 of Mark is the longest chunk of teaching to his disciples in Mark
In the book, and Jesus gives his disciples warnings about coming persecutions
And about what scholars would understand as the destruction of the temple
But, in today's reading, we move into something all-encompassing
The coming, not simply of the Romans to destroy Jerusalem
But the coming of the Son of Man with great power and glory
We hear these words:
**'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,**

**and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.**

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

This imagery is from the Old Testament, from the prophetic tradition
From those who speak of the Day of the Lord: of the coming of God
To judge the world in righteousness.

The imagery itself is of the destabilisation of those things that seem most secure
The sun rising in the morning; the stars guiding at night
None of what gives us stability in this world can stand, can remain
When the Lord comes in his power and glory.

We need to hear this, especially when we are tempted to find our hope
In the things of this world
Even in good things like marriage or family or the institutions
Of culture or science or government
Jesus wants us to understand that none of these things are God.

He also wants to assure us that when we face the breaking apart
Of all that would seem to give us stability in this world
That there is one thing that will stand: his word
Listen to what he says: **‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**

Jesus’ word is sure, when we listen to him
Our feet find sure footing in the flood of chaos
Our hands hold on to that which does not vanish
Our conscience finds rest, and peace which this world cannot give

Again, Jesus reminds his disciples, he reminds us
That getting the timeline of his coming straight is not the central question
Rather, it is being ready to receive him as he comes to us
Whenever that is; listen to what he says: **But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going**

on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

One way to receive this teaching:

Think about where God has placed you in your vocations

What responsibilities has God given you as a parent or child

As a worker or employer; as a citizen of this country?

Your Lord is coming to you as you serve those he calls you to serve

It is in faithful service that we keep awake for the coming of the Lord in glory

But lest we think that keeping Jesus' command

Is at the centre of our life as Christians, consider this:

In the Gospels none of the disciples can keep his command

Not even the inner circle of the disciples, of those chosen first

Not even St Peter himself.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus commands his disciples to keep awake

Exactly the same wording from today's reading

And yet they all fall asleep

It is Jesus alone who stays awake, watching and praying

And it is he who calls his disciples from sleep into wakefulness

For us, too, it is Christ who calls us onto spiritual wakefulness

In our liturgy today our Lord is coming to us

And speaking his word, the word which will not pass away

Listen for the words of our Lord Jesus Christ

He will say 'This is my body, this is my blood

Given and shed for the forgiveness of sins'.

This is stability for us in the face of all that brings death and destruction

Even our sins

Our hope is not in the stability we can create

Even our faithfulness is an uncertain prospect

But his word does not pass away; it brings us to faith and keeps us in faith

It gives what we cannot create: the forgiveness of sins, and life with God

May God keep us in this faith, so that we stay awake

And are found by God faithfully serving in our vocations

For the good of our neighbour, and to the glory of God. In Jesus' name. Amen!