

Endurance

November 17, 2013

Luke 21:5-19

This passage always makes me think of that great chorus from Mendelssohn's oratorio, *Elijah*, which quotes the words of Jesus in Matthew: "He that shall endure to the end shall be saved."

What do you suppose would happen to you if the very center of your world were suddenly destroyed? I mean, the focal point of your whole life – gone.

In our gospel reading for today Jesus is preparing the disciples for just such a situation, a situation that would occur when Jerusalem is destroyed.

Jesus knew what the city of Jerusalem meant to the Jews. He knew that for them it was not only the center of the world but also the most important place in the world. It was the site of the Temple, famous for its architectural design and expensive decorations.

Now this wasn't Solomon's temple. You remember that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in the seventh century BC. This one was built by Ezra after the return from exile in the 6th century, desecrated by the Seleucids in the 2nd century, rededicated by the Maccabees, and then greatly expanded by Herod the Great over a period of years.

Being the site of this magnificent Temple, Jerusalem was a holy city blessed with God's special presence and every Jew was required to visit and worship there at specified times every year.

So to talk about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was to talk about the destruction of the Jewish world and the Jewish identity.

Well, the disciples were no doubt shocked and distressed to hear about this, and they immediately started asking questions, as most of us would. When is this going to happen? How can we know and be ready?

And it almost seems as though Jesus goes off on a tangent that isn't really addressing what he started out talking about at all.

He says that many will come in his name claiming to be the Messiah, and the disciples may well have wondered what in the world that had to do with the Temple being destroyed.

But a closer reading shows us that what Jesus was saying was that the destruction of the temple would not be the end of the world for the Jews because they would have to face another end – the final one.

That may well have confused the disciples at that time, as it does many today who think that Jesus was referring to what we call his Second Coming. More on that in a minute.

Now if our gospel reading had stopped right there, it would have left us with a great lesson. When we face tragedy and our world appears to have come to an end, our behavior should not be that of resignation but that of endurance until we can rejoice in God's restoration and have the assurance of spending eternity in His presence.

Endurance can bring us closer to God, especially when we trust Him to restore us. Nearly everyone faces a time at some point in life that his or her world would appear to have come apart.

But Jesus' words here are words of assurance. He is coming again to receive his own, and restoration is possible no matter the situation or the problems that had threatened to destroy us.

That's a great promise and one that I hope you will not overlook. But today's reading has more to teach us as well, so let's look further.

Jesus has predicted the destruction of the temple, and the disciples assumed that this would also mark the end of the world. But of course, they didn't have our perspective, with over 2000 years of history to back it, so our understanding should be different.

The destruction of the Temple occurred in 70 A.D. but the end of the world has not yet come.

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple Israel ceased to exist as a nation. The Jews were dispersed and scattered all over the world. Many false messiahs have come and gone and some are still with us today.

Events such as wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilences and strange events in the heavens are occurring with increasing frequency and anti-Semitism continues to incite hatred towards the Jewish people.

All these have happened yet the world has not come to an end. We are not to be deceived to see in these events a timeframe for the end times or a Second coming of Christ.

Many modern day prophets have become experts on predicting when the end will come based on their interpretation of certain scriptures.

A few years ago many people were made to believe that the time had come and they removed their children from schools, stopped work and got rid of their property only to find out that they had once more been deceived.

We should be used to such deception by now, and yet it seems that every so often someone will come along with an "end is near" campaign and many people buy into it.

When Jerusalem was destroyed the Jews felt that their world had come to an end. They were not only without a country but they would also lose their language and experience untold hardships.

Sometimes they were treated worse than animals and during the holocaust 6 million Jews were murdered in the gas chambers of Nazi Germany. There were doctors like Mengele who performed medical experiments using Jews as guinea pigs.

But in spite of all that the Jews went through they never gave up. They endured till the time of restoration in 1948 when Israel once more became a nation and the Hebrew language, a language that had not been spoken for several centuries, was once more restored.

They have given us an example that no matter how bad the situation may look, God is able to restore and we should also never give up when we face difficulties or experiences that we consider being the end of our world.

You know, in a lifetime there are many ends before the final end. It might be the end of a friendship, a relationship, or a marriage. It might be the death of a child, a parent, a sibling, a spouse, or a friend.

They can be seen as devastations that result in depression and despair or they can be seen as challenges to be dealt with. We can let the overwhelming feelings of sadness bury us alive or we can rebuild with the final end in mind and live in its light.

We need to see every bad experience as an opportunity to reshape our priorities, revise our values. We should not miss out on the many opportunities that come our way by letting ourselves get caught up in self-pity and despair.

With God we have hope for today and hope for the future that makes life worth living. How can we be afraid of today or the future when it is in God's hands?

Now, that doesn't mean that we just sit back and say, OK, God, handle it. God expects us to do all that we can to help ourselves.

But God does promise strength and endurance if we trust him.

Now, as I said, there is more to this gospel reading. In answer to the disciples' questions about when and how the end, in their understanding, was coming, Jesus had some pretty graphic things to say.

He listed the what we now know as standard apocalyptic signs of the end- false messiahs, claiming the end is imminent, wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, strange events in the skies- and states they are signs, manifestations of evil in every age, the present one included.

His disciples are not to be frightened by them or duped into believing that they are more than they are. They are signs of evil, not the End.

They will necessarily precede the End because they are always present. Because they are signs of evil in every age they are not to be lightly dismissed.

They should be taken seriously as reminders, signs that all will end someday- either personally in one's death, as these frequently cause many deaths in their wake; nationally, in the death of a country conquered or destroyed by another; or naturally, in the death caused by natural disasters.

The Christian should interpret these signs as salutary reminders to shape up before the real and final end.

I've talked before on "Misconceptions about the Second Coming," and will have more to say about that in the future. But in light of today's gospel reading, I think a few things need to be said here.

In all three Synoptic gospels, just before the passion narrative, there is a "sermon" on the "last things," called by some "Jesus' eschatological discourse" and by others "Jesus' apocalyptic discourse."

None of the three terms-discourse, eschatological or apocalyptic- is entirely accurate or helpful.

The verses in question are not a continuous sermon but a collection of isolated sayings of Jesus put together to summarize his teaching on the end of time.

Having said that, one might think that "Eschatological," which is the theological study of ultimate or final things, such as death, the destiny of humanity, the Second Coming, or the Last Judgment," would be appropriate.

It is not, for Jesus mixed his teaching on the "end of time" or the "end time" with other "ends, "timely ends," the end of one's personal time in this world, the end of "the world of meaning" for the Jews, that is, Jerusalem and the Temple, even the end of our own personal worlds of meaning encountered in disasters- cosmic, natural, political, social and personal.

While it is true that Jesus used familiar "apocalyptic" imagery- the falling of stars from the sky, eclipses of sun and moon, political upheavals, wars, pestilence, famine, hurricanes and floods- he used them to illustrate, dramatize, emphasize his more profound points more than to describe actual occurrences.

Such occurrences, he pointed out, happen all the time, in every age. They are not necessarily "signs" of the End. They are signs of evil. Always present on earth, evil flares up at times and becomes painfully and undeniably obvious. Such as what happened on September 11th to the World Trade center.

Luke copied some of what he says here straight from Mark 13:8-11. However, he depends on Mark for more than that.

To Mark he adds his own peculiar material, called “L” for Luke. He wants to clarify what Mark has said in the light of two related matters:

First, Luke is writing well after 70AD, so the prophecy that Jerusalem would be destroyed has been fulfilled. And second, the End has not yet come and does not look like its coming any time soon, in earth years.

So, Luke separates, more than Mark or Matthew, the end of Jerusalem from the End Time. It is advisable to refrain from using the term “end of the world” here, for Luke does not use it or really have it in mind.

“End Result,” the final state of affairs, might be a better term. In fact, neither Luke nor Mark use the term “Parousia,” which means second coming, for the coming of the Son of Man. Only Matthew does. Luke wants to make a different point.

Jerusalem represented to a Jew his or her whole “world,” his or her whole world of meaning. All the meaning of life was wrapped up in what Jerusalem symbolized.

For that city to come to a physical end meant the collapse of their world, wherever they might physically live. Jesus predicted that it would end and it did.

Luke wants to say to “everyone who lives on the face of the earth” (21:35) that their world and world of meaning will come to a similar end.

Thus, all must prepare for the inevitable, sudden and surprising though it may be. The fulfilled prophecy of the end of Jerusalem serves to bolster the fulfillment of the as yet unfulfilled prophecy of the end of everybody’s world, everybody’s center of meaning and life.

The end of Jerusalem was a foreshadowing, a precursor, a harbinger of the big End at the end for all. It was a prime and typical example of what Jesus means when he speaks of the last things, the end, the End Time, the Day of Judgment, the day(s) of the Son of Man.

Notice he does not say the end of all. There is really no clear indication that the physical world, God’s creation, this universe will ever stop existing, at least, in some form.

What the Bible and, especially, Jesus indicate is that our world, as we know it, the meaning this world holds for us, will end, and where we are when that happens is determinative of where we begin in eternity.

Thus this world, especially world of meaning, this time, our time on this planet, is our opportunity to make decisions about who is first in our lives and to live according to that decision, so that the “end” will find us ready to begin.

There is really only one preparation for these many “ends” in a human lifetime. It is living well, living our daily lives in the presence of God. God will prepare us, prepare our defense and protect our essential lives.

A person may be surprised to learn from his or her doctor that he or she has a terminal illness. It is too late then to prepare. The best preparation, of course, would have been a life of regular exercise and a healthy diet.

If the person actually lived that way and still got sick, that person would have a better than average chance of either fighting the disease successfully or of living longer than the ordinary prognosis would estimate.

So it is with all the “ends” of our lives. If we daily take care of today’s business and challenges, neither procrastinating nor behaving as if we have all the time in the world, we grow stronger each day to face and live well in the next day, should another day be given to us.

If not, we become progressively less equipped to take up the challenges of ordinary life, let alone the challenges of tragedies and extraordinary events.

Perseverance up until the End involves a daily fidelity, not some flashy last minute resistance. The “signs,” when they become such for us, are wake-up calls and shake up calls to get us back to what is centrally important about daily life.

The “End” of the world is happening all the time in all the little “ends” we experience.

Jesus does not predict when the physical world as we know it will end or even that it will end at all. In anyone’s lifetime there are many “ends,” wherein a particular world of meaning ceases to exist.

The end of one’s time on earth, one’s physical death, marks an end to these other “ends” and the beginning of living in the End Time, which never ends.

How one lives and loves daily life, that is, with vigilant fidelity to the Lord, prepares one to face catastrophes, major and minor, which catastrophes, in turn, prepare one to face the end of this life and the beginning of our eternal life with God.