

TODAY IS THE SECOND LAST SUNDAY OF THE CHURCH YEAR. NEXT SUNDAY WE WILL CELEBRATE THE FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING AND THEN IT WILL BE DECEMBER AND TIME FOR ADVENT AND THE START OF ANOTHER LITURGICAL YEAR.

ON THIS WEEKEND THE READINGS TRADITIONALLY SPEAK ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD, THE END OF TIME, THE FINAL COMING OF JESUS TO TAKE ALL PEOPLES TO HIMSELF.

IN THE PASSAGE IMMEDIATELY BEFORE TODAY'S GOSPEL, JESUS SPEAKS ABOUT THE FALL AND THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM. IT WAS A CATASTROPHIC EXPERIENCE FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE: EVEN WORSE THAN THE DESTRUCTION OF ROME AND ST. PETER'S WOULD BE FOR US AS CATHOLIC CHRISTIANS. BECAUSE FOR THE JEWS, JERUSALEM AND ITS TEMPLE WAS THE VERY DWELLING PLACE OF GOD. IT WAS NOT THE FIRST TIME THE TEMPLE HAD BEEN DESECRATED AND THE JEWS DRIVEN OUT INTO EXILE BUT THIS TIME THE DESTRUCTION HAS LASTED FOR OVER 2000 YEARS. IN FACT, THERE IS A MUSLIM MOSQUE NOW ON THE SITE AND THAT IS NOT LIKELY TO CHANGE ANY TIME SOON.

FOR THE EARLY CHURCH IT WAS A VERY SIGNIFICANT EVENT. EVEN IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL, WHICH PREDATED THE DESTRUCTION OF THE CITY AND THE TEMPLE, HE ALREADY SPEAKS OF THE NEW TEMPLE WHICH ARE THE MEMBERS OF THE BODY OF CHRIST. CHRIST WAS TO BE FOUND IN PEOPLE AND NOT IN A BUILDING AND THAT IS WHY THE DESTRUCTION OF THE VATICAN AND ST. PETER'S, AS TRAGIC AS THAT WOULD BE, WOULD NOT AFFECT THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH.

WE KNOW HISTORICALLY IN THE EARLY CHURCH, CHRISTIANS ASSEMBLED IN PRIVATE HOMES. CHURCHES AS WE KNOW THEM ONLY CAME INTO EXISTENCE WHEN THE FAITH SPREAD SO QUICKLY THAT HOMES WERE TOO SMALL. ASSEMBLY HALLS

(BASILICAS IN GREEK) HAD TO BE USED AND EVENTUALLY THESE WERE USED EXCLUSIVELY FOR WORSHIP.

TODAY JESUS SPEAKS TO US OF THE APPEARANCE OF THE SON OF MAN IN GLORY AND THE FINAL ESTABLISHMENT OF THE REIGN OF GOD – NO LONGER A KINGDOM, NO MORE TIME AND PLACE. MANY PEOPLE WILL COME UNDER THAT REIGN, PROBABLY MORE THAN WE EXPECT. AFTER ALL GOD’S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS.

THE SON OF MAN HERE IS UNDERSTOOD TO BE JESUS, THE MAN ON EARTH THAT THE DISCIPLES KNEW AND LOVED, BUT NOW APPEARING IN ALL THE UNPARALLELED GLORY OF HIS HEAVENLY FATHER’S MAJESTY. IN FACT, HIS APPEARANCE IS DESCRIBED IN TERMS USUALLY USED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR THE APPEARANCES OF GOD HIMSELF. HE SENDS OUT ANGELS OR MESSENGERS AND GATHERS ALL GOD’S PEOPLE TOGETHER. THE SCATTERED PEOPLE ARE GATHERED TO JERUSALEM AND TO GOD HIMSELF.

YES, THE FIRST HALF OF TODAY’S GOSPEL LEANS HEAVILY ON TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE AND IDEAS. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND AND EMPHASIZE THAT DESCRIPTION OF EVENTS IS NOT TO BE UNDERSTOOD LITERALLY AS A PROPHECY OF WHAT IS ACTUALLY GOING TO HAPPEN. RATHER WE ARE TO LOOK AT THE INNER MEANING OF THESE HAPPENINGS. THE COSMIC DISTURBANCES ABOUT THE SUN, THE MOON AND THE STARS ARE TRADITIONAL WAYS OF DESCRIBING THE SIGNS OF GOD’S JUDGMENT OF ISRAEL.

IN ANCIENT ISRAELITE TIMES, PEOPLE BELIEVED THAT THE SUN, MOON AND STARS REPRESENTED DEITIES OR MINOR GODS WHO CONTROLLED WORLD AFFAIRS. WHAT SCRIPTURE IS TEACHING HERE IS THAT THESE CELESTIAL BODIES WHICH OTHER NATIONS BELIEVED CONTROLLED HISTORY WOULD BE SHOWN TO BE HELPLESS UNDER THE POWER OF GOD. IN MARK’S TIME THE BELIEF IN THE POWER OF THE STARS WAS

VERY STRONG. IN A FEW SHORT WEEKS WE WILL AGAIN BE REMINDED OF THE WISE MEN FROM THE EAST WHO FOLLOWED A STAR. ASTRONOMY OR ASTROLOGY PEOPLE HAVE RELIGIOUSLY CONSULTED AND STUDIED THE STARS DOWN THROUGH TIME TRYING TO PREDICT THEIR INFLUENCE ON HUMAN EVENTS.

EARLY CHRISTIANS DID EXPECT JESUS WOULD RETURN IN THEIR LIFETIME. AND THIS IS REFLECTED IN THE WORDS, THIS GENERATION WILL NOT PASS AWAY UNTIL THESE THINGS HAVE TAKEN PLACE. IT WAS NATURAL FOR THOSE WHO GREW UP IN THE JEWISH TRADITION TO BELIEVE THAT THE END OF JERUSALEM COULD ONLY MEAN THE END OF THE WORLD.

JESUS THEN GIVES US A SHORT PARABLE OR LESSON FROM THE FIG TREE. FIG TREES WERE A PROMINENT AND WELL-KNOWN FEATURE ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES WHERE HE IS SPEAKING. THIS TREE ONLY SPROUTS ITS LEAVES IN LATE SPRING. WHEN THEY APPEAR, YOU KNOW THAT SUMMER IS NEAR AND THAT'S A GOOD THING.

SO, JESUS IS SAYING THAT ALTHOUGH THE END OF THE WORLD IS BEING DESCRIBED AS A CALAMITY HIS DISCIPLES ARE TO RESPOND WITH FAITH, WITH HOPE.

THERE ARE STILL SOME WHO WARN THAT THE END IS NEAR. THEY SEE SIGNS IN STORMS AND FIRES, IN WARS AND IN DESTRUCTION. SOME EVEN WARN ON THE BASIS OF APPARITIONS THAT GOD, OFFENDED BY SO MUCH EVIL IN OUR WORLD IS GOING TO TAKE TERRIBLE VENGEANCE. TO ME THIS IS DANGEROUS LANGUAGE. GOD DOES NOT TAKE REVENGE. YES, THE WRITERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT EXPLAINED CALAMITY BY DESCRIBING A VENGEFUL GOD, BUT GOD, JESUS HEAVENLY FATHER, IS CERTAINLY NOT OFFENDED BY WHAT WE HUMANS DO. HIS IS A NEVER CHANGING LOVE. HE HAS NOTHING BUT COMPASSION FOR THE SINNER WHO DOES NOT, CANNOT HURT GOD BUT ONLY HURTS HIMSELF.

SO, IT COMES DOWN TO THIS AS DO SO MANY OF MY HOMILIES. THE ONLY WAY TO LIVE FOR A DISCIPLE IS TO LIVE TODAY AND EVERY DAY AS JESUS DID IN LOVE AND

IN SERVICE. IF WE DO THAT THEN WE HAVE ALREADY ENTERED THE REIGN OF GOD. AND WHEN HE COMES, EARLY OR LATE TO CALL US TO HIMSELF, IT WILL JUST BE A REUNION OF OLD FRIENDS. IN FACT, WE FEEL HIS PRESENCE NOW THROUGH THE WORKING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. SO, IT IS NOT SO MUCH THAT HE WILL COME TO US BUT THAT WE WILL ENTER INTO A DEEPER AND TOTALLY LOVING RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.