

Sermon for Proper 28B

The Text: Mark 13:1-8

“Can you believe the size of this thing?” you say to the person next to you. The courtyard you’re standing in nearly swallows you; a vast rectangular space that measures nearly 180 metres east to west and about 185 metres north to south. You gaze in awe at the buildings towering around you, seemingly larger than life itself, built with massive stones, some measuring 11 x 5½ x 3½ metres. Some are made from white marble, others are covered with gold, reflecting the sunlight in dazzling splendour. It is Herod’s Temple, one of the most impressive man-made structures of the ancient world. As Jesus comes out of the Temple, you hear one of His disciples say to Him, “Look, Teacher, what great stones and what great buildings!” You hear Jesus respond with an answer you did not expect: “Do you see these magnificent buildings? Not one stone in this place will remain on another, they will surely be thrown down.”

Later, Peter, James, John and Andrew, sitting on the Mount of Olives across from this grand building, ask Jesus privately: “Tell us—when will these things happen and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be fulfilled?” The disciples thought that the destruction of the temple would be the event that ushered in the end times; when Jesus would save God’s people Israel. However Jesus didn’t tell them when. He simply describes some of the events that were going to happen, with the destruction of the Temple being one of those, along with wars, earthquakes and famines. Jesus said that these things are merely the birth pains. In other words, the time is not yet. The contractions are here but the birth is still in the future, when the Son of God will come with his final victory, judging the living and the dead.

The destruction of the Temple would happen for two reasons. First, Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem and His visit to the Temple has failed to find the response of repentance and faith among the Jewish leaders and people that God required. Here was the Saviour He promised but they had thrown God’s gift back in His face. They refused to accept Him as the promised Saviour and in doing so the people as a whole had turned against God and His prophets again. The destruction of their prized temple as part of the devastation wrought on the city of Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 AD was therefore part of God’s judgement on the nation.

But the destruction of the Temple would happen for a second reason. Now, with the coming of Jesus, the Temple is redundant. It is useless for it is no longer the place of God’s presence. It therefore has ceased to

serve the original purpose God established for it: the meeting place between God and His people where He would graciously be present to bestow His blessing and favour upon them. The Most Holy Place, the place of God's presence is now in His Son, where the fullness of the Godhead dwells in bodily form. The Temple is out and the Son of Man is in.

At the centre of the Temple was the sanctuary, which was elevated and was reached by 12 steps, and divided into the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Only the priests were allowed to enter the Holy Place. The Most Holy Place was where God resided. He demanded that His presence be contained in a room that ordinary priests and people could not enter. This room was blocked off by a thick curtain, about a hand thickness, that prevented people from entering and defiling God's holiness and therefore bringing themselves under God's just sentence of death. Only the High Priest was consecrated to enter the Most Holy Place, and on only one day a year—the Day of Atonement, when he made payment for the sins of all Israel with the blood of an animal sacrifice.

Jesus is both our High Priest who has entered into the heavens, but also the sacrifice. He made payment for the sins of the whole world with His very own holy and precious blood. When Jesus died the Temple curtain was torn in two, showing us that access to God is now by the death of Christ who has fulfilled the former sacrificial system. There is no barrier between God and people through faith in Jesus.

God rendered the Temple useless because now His presence is not in a building but in the Person of Christ. When the disciple exclaims in our text: "Look, Teacher, what great stones and what great buildings!" he is addressing an even greater, more precious stone, Christ the cornerstone, where the fullness of God dwells, a temple that could not be destroyed. "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up" Jesus says of Himself. And He meant it. When that Temple was crucified and buried, it was not destroyed. It rose on the third day and still stands.

And here we see God's great theme of reversal, where things are upside down and back-to-front according to the thinking of the world. What is attractive to the world, what is grandiose and awesome, magnificent and spectacular, is not God's chosen means of operating. For Jesus, our High Priest, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, humbling Himself and becoming obedient to His Father's will by dying on a cross.

Where the world evaluates the success of its leaders according to their wealth, their army and weaponry, their media campaigns and opinion poll ratings, God chooses weakness to be the most powerful rule this world will ever see. In God's theme of reversal, the most glorious home was no skyscraper or elaborate architecture, but a feed box in a stinking stable which held the Christ child. The world reveres the powerful and popular but in God's great theme of reversal the most powerful reign this world will ever see is the reign of Christ from the throne of His Cross. For in being abandoned to death, Jesus overcame death for you. He paid the wages of your sin to rescue you from the dominion of Satan. How glorious is the Cross, yet not in the way the world looks for glory. The Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing:

When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! Come down from the cross, if You are the Son of God!"

But to us who are being saved, the message of the cross is the power of God.

"Look! What great stones and what great buildings!" is the cry of the world which sees power and might and success and security in the impressive, in the big and strong, in the materially rich and spectacularly entertaining. The disciple's words could be anyone's from today's world. The world loves buildings like the Temple, but in God's great theme of reversal, He is well pleased with the little church with the leaky roof and cracked windows, because wherever the word of God and sacraments are, Christ is truly present, and He indeed pronounces all those who receive them to be truly righteous in His sight.

And in such a place God's heart is for those who are not esteemed according to what the world's values.

Yet gathered around the Most Holy Place, Jesus the Christ, are repentant sinners, frail, failing, in need of God's mercy, those who need healing or who have lost their jobs, those whose families are falling apart, those who have anxiety disorders and those who are on the brink of despair under the weight of their sins.

But such as these God has chosen to belong to Him in whom He makes His power perfect. Such as these are frowned upon by the world, but in God's great theme of reversal, these are the holy ones who have

overcome the world in Christ. These are the ones to whom is given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. These are the ones to whom will be awarded the crown of righteousness. In the eyes of the world the modest church buildings hosting dwindling numbers of mostly senior people are ridiculous, a sign of failure. Church is only for the weak. And they are right! For we *are* weak, yet in our weakness the power of Christ is made perfect in us. We gather around Christ, the Most Holy Place, as He washes us sinners clean and joins us to Him in Holy Baptism. Through the Word and as He serves you His body and blood, Jesus meets you to do what is humanly impossible: free you from sin, bless you and grant salvation. This is true power, splendour and grandeur.

As you hear the words of the world: "Teacher, Look! What great stones and what great buildings!" hear Jesus' reply: "Do you see these magnificent buildings? Not one stone in this place will remain on another, they will surely be thrown down." This has been fulfilled for you. So when we hear of wars, storms, strife and disaster, hear Jesus words today: Do not be alarmed. It is necessary for these things to happen, but it will not yet be the end. For nation will be raised against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines. These things are the beginning of birth pains."

Jesus is coming again and He is coming for you so that you may see the Most Holy Place, the fullness of the glory of God, face to face. So take heart, stand firm to the end whatever your burden today...for in the words of the Apostle Paul: "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."

The time is not yet. Jesus is still coming. May we all pray: "Come Lord Jesus, into our world that tears itself apart. Come anew into our lives and rule our hearts with your word each day, giving us courage and peace as we long for your return." And as we do long for His return, know that He has ascended to the right hand of the Father where He prays for you. Know that He will lead you through every trial and tribulation and suffering and even death and to bring you safely home to your heavenly Father's waiting arms! Brothers and sisters, trust in Christ and in Christ alone, for the Temple stones have been thrown down and in Christ the way to heaven has been opened for us. Amen.