

“The Destruction of the Temple”

Mark 13: 14-23

Proper 28B, Boise, 2021

Last Sunday, the bishop dedicated our temple here, where we go to meet God in worship, in the proclamation of His Word, and in the administration of the sacraments. Today, we read the account in the Gospel of Our Lord’s prophesying the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. N. T. Wright argues that the so-called cleansing of the Temple by Jesus — in which He took control of the whole complex there, and thus caused the sacrifices to cease for the rest of the day — was really a symbolic action announcing the Temple’s coming destruction. But, whether or not you buy that argument, Jesus couldn’t have been more clear than He is in this passage we have just read that God would soon withdraw His protection from Mount Zion, and allow Israel’s enemies to invade the holy city and tear down its Temple. As He says to introduce the subject: “There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” [Mk 13: 2b].

And such is what I will talk about today — that prediction and its fulfillment forty years later. Now I can already hear the groans: Is this going to be a history lesson? Well, yes, in part. But only because in the study of the Gospel history is unavoidable. When the Divine Word became flesh, He acted and spoke in particular times and places, and those actions and words had real-world consequences. The destruction of the Second Temple, which some Jews built after their return from exile in Babylon, changed the course of both Judaism and early Christianity, forty years after Our made made the prediction. When the Jews lost their Temple, they lost the only place where sacrifice was authorized. Hence, they now have only synagogue services, the highlight of which is a reading from a hand-copied Torah scroll, retrieved from a box they call “the tabernacle.” The rabbis today are thus heirs of the scribes and Pharisees that we encounter in the Gospels. Their main connection with God is through the Torah,

or what our NT call the “The Law.”

All that should be fairly obvious, but the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem wrought changes in the structure and composition of the Church also. In the Acts of the Apostles, most of the Christians we meet were themselves Jews, and most of them continued the Torah-observance, circumcision and all. The first Christian congregation met in Solomon’s Portico on the Temple Mount. We read also that the Apostles themselves attended sacrifices for a while in front of the Temple. St Paul was arrested there when he and four others were fulfilling their Nazarite vows, as prescribed in Numbers. But, with the destruction of the Temple, the early Christians’ tie to Judaism was loosened. In the later decades of the first century, believers in Christ were expelled from the synagogues, just as He Himself had predicted [Jn 16: 2]. There are persons today who identify themselves as “Messianic Jews,” but that form of our religion is a recent revival. Jewish Christianity, the dominant form while the Temple was still standing, faded after its destruction. Consequently, our memory now of both Torah and Temple is purely historical. We read of them in the Bible, but they form merely the setting of the story we are interested in.

So here we are today in that story at the place where Jesus prophesies the destruction. “When you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be — let the reader understand (the reader, that is, of a prophecy in Daniel) — “then let those who are in Judaea flee to the mountains.” Jesus says that to the Apostles so that, four decades later, His followers in Jerusalem and in the towns surrounding it will know what to do when the soldiers lay siege to the city, after their countrymen rebel against the Romans. The story is told by the historian Josephus in his work *The Jewish Wars*.

Our Lord gives precise instructions. Flee immediately when you see the soldiers arrive, He says.

Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take

anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter.

To which St Matthew's Gospel will add, to remind us of the Jewish context, "pray that your flight may not be . . . on the Sabbath," either [Matt 24: 20].

We can read in Josephus about men who claimed during the Jewish revolt to be the Messiah. Jesus has something to say about that, too.

If anyone says to you, "Look, here is Christ!" or "Look, there he is!" do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect [those chosen for the Kingdom]. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.

The Christians in Jerusalem, whom we read about in The Acts, would indeed escape the Roman slaughter. But, as I indicated earlier, they will not remain as the dominant force in the Church after AD 70. Before that date, the Torah-keeping believers of Judaea were looked upon by most other Christians as the mother church.

On the First Sunday in Advent, we will revisit this prophecy that Our Lord delivered to His disciples on the Mount of Olives, as they overlooked the Temple. And we will discover then, when we read more of the prophecy in its Lucan version, that we have not quite done with it — because it takes us to "the time of the end." We in fact have a hint of this in today's OT reading from Daniel. To those who read the Books of the Maccabees in the Apocrypha, it will seem that most of the prophecies in Daniel were fulfilled a century and a half before Christ was born. A few verses after where our OT reading ended, we have mentioned for the third time in the book "the abomination [or "transgression"] that makes desolate." The author of 1 Maccabees applies that prophecy to the desolation of the Temple with pagan sacrifices by the Syrian occupier Antiochus IV. Near the end of Daniel we have: "And from the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be 1,290 days" [Dan 12: 11]. During those 3 1/2 years of the occupation, the daily

sacrifices to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ceased. They resumed when Judas Maccabaeus drove out the invader and rededicated the Temple, an event the Jews now commemorate with the Feast of Purim.

But Daniel's visions do not end there. The Jews certainly experienced "a time of trouble," from which they were delivered by military victories when facing long odds, but the last event stated in our OT reading — "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" [12: 2] — has yet to take place. Christ, in today's Gospel, applied a prophecy in Daniel to the Roman soldiers' destruction of the Second Temple. Certainly, that was an "abomination that made desolate" the place where God met His worshipping people, on which now sits the Al Aqsa Mosque. But there was no resurrection of the dead in AD 70, either. We have not done with a prophecy, particularly a prophecy of the end, until all of it is fulfilled.

And fulfilled it will be. We will affirm that in the profession we will again make of our fundamental beliefs after I end this sermon. So let it now end.

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