

The scene of today's Gospel reading from Luke is the temple in Jerusalem. We are at the end of a long journey that in Luke's telling spans several chapters across which Jesus is on the road to here, this place, the heart of Jewish life and worship.

King Herod, who readers of the Gospel remember as an enemy of Christ, sought rather to be remembered as an ambitious builder, and the renovation of the Jerusalem temple was to be his crowning achievement. His aim was that the Jerusalem temple should be the most opulent in the known world, and according to Roman historians, he succeeded. The temple's outer court was built of towering columns of marble, single quarried and polished stones each over 30 feet high, accented by dazzling gold. This explains Luke's opening reference to the temple's "noble stones."

The temple was surely a splendor to behold, and yet our Lord issues a sober warning about the fate of the temple: "the days will come when there shall not be left one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

Picture the immensity and beauty of the stones that composed the temple, and you can begin to appreciate the gravity of our Lord's statement. And yet this does not capture the depth of what he is saying, for the temple is not just a building, imposing and gorgeous as it was, but it is the very spiritual home of the Jewish people and the place where God is rightly worshiped. What Jesus predicts here is not just the destruction of a building but nothing less than the destruction of an entire way of life.

Within one generation though what he says will come to pass, does. The Roman general Titus tore the Jerusalem temple down to the ground in 70 AD, looted it of its sacred treasures, and massacred most of the city's surviving population.

No wonder our Lord's hearers ask when this unthinkable disaster will come and what signs might portend it. But Jesus never answers a question like this directly: He never talks about when and where. Instead he promises yet more disasters: "wars and tumults," "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom," "there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven."

The ancient world was obsessed with signs of this kind, finding all sorts of significance in odd inexplicable events thought to augur imminent doom. The Jewish historian Josephus records that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem was presaged by a star in the heavens that looked like a sword, by a comet that lingered in the night sky for a full year, and by a cow giving birth to a sheep.

You will notice though that our Lord's description of the signs of things to come is much more pedestrian than Josephus's rather eccentric—and frankly implausible—list.

Wars and famine and pestilence and natural disaster are all too familiar. They would have been then, and they remain so today. We don't need a cosmic freak show like a cow giving birth to a sheep to tell us that the world is beset by evils.

But I haven't even got to the worst part yet. "Before all this," Jesus says, "before all this," as if that weren't enough, "they will lay their hands on you and persecute you...for my name's sake," "you will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; you will be hated by all for my name's sake."

This too is all too familiar. Read the book of Acts, Luke's sequel to his Gospel, and you will see that all of this comes true too, within a few short years of Jesus's resurrection and ascension to his Father. To be hated for bearing the name of Jesus Christ was a reality then, and it is so for many today.

Our brothers and sisters around the world face persecution the likes of which we can be grateful we don't know. But even here as we confront the decline of the Christian church's vitality and influence, the prospect of an end to our way of life does not seem that remote.

So what are we to do?

The answer is in verse 9: "do not be terrified." When confronted with wars and tumults it's hard to imagine how we could be anything but entirely terrified. So how are we to obey our Lord in this matter? There is only one way, and that is to learn what is really worth our being terrified of.

My favorite philosopher, the Danish existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, says one difference between the Christian and the nonbeliever is that the Christian laughs at what terrifies the nonbeliever and is terrified of only one thing: the loss of our soul. For the Christian, loss of safety, loss of livelihood, loss of family are grave evils to be sure, but they are not the worst loss.

Jesus Christ tells us in verse 16 that some of his hearers will be put to death, and yet "not a hair of your head will perish." How in the world that can be true? How can a person die and yet not have a hair of their head perish? Only if there is a fate quite literally worse than death. Only if the death of the body is nothing compared to the perishing of the soul. This I think is what Jesus really means in the final verse of our Gospel reading today, which translates the Greek word "souls" as "lives." By your endurance you will save your *souls*.

As much as we rightly cherish the noble stones and offerings of St. Stephen's Providence or the Church of the Advent Boston or St. Thomas Fifth Avenue, our faith is not built on those noble stones.

Our faith is built on the solid rock that is Jesus Christ himself. And not even the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

We look at a beautiful and solid structure like this, we look at empires and nations, and we think these things last forever, and our lives are so short as to pale into insignificance, but we have it exactly wrong. It's the other way around.

Not one stone of this building could be left standing, our way of life as Christian people in this place could come to an effective end, and yet those of us who believe in Jesus Christ would have no reason to be terrified because by faith in him though we be martyred we shall not die but live.

The life that Jesus Christ promises us is a life that cannot die. It is indestructible. This cannot be said of anything else.

Yet if you can say of yourself that you trust in him, that you are not terrified, that you will save your soul by enduring all things through faith in him then you too—you too are indestructible. AMEN.