

Pentecost 25 C 2010
Proper 28
Texts: Isaiah 65: 17-25
2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13
Luke 21:5-19

“ By your endurance you will gain your souls.” Luke 21:19

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

I am often reminded how we live in several different worlds all at the same time. We are halfway through the month of November already. We just celebrated Armistice Day, Veteran’s Day, when the treaty to end the war to end all wars was signed. World War I ended, but very soon afterwards, so would the peace that the treaty ushered in.

Thanksgiving is a mere eleven days away and we are five weeks away from Christmas. We are working our way to the end of 2010. I can’t say that I am truly sorry to see it leave and am hoping for a better year in 2011.

We are also coming to the end of the liturgical year. Next week we will celebrate Christ the King Sunday, the celebration of Christ being the true king and true ruler over the world. In two weeks time the new liturgical year begins again with the start of Advent as we prepare for the coming of Christ into the world.

It is a time of endings and a time of beginnings. One age folds and another begins. Our gospel today is all about endings and beginnings and the fear that is usually part of both. Our gospel is about being prepared for the worst, knowing that the best is yet to come.

In today’s reading from Luke, we have Jesus and the disciples on their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. It will not be long before Jesus is put to death. He knows his hour is coming and he is trying to get his disciples ready for what will happen after his death. Their minds were really not on any of that.

The disciples were discussing the fabulous Temple that Herod built. It was huge and could be seen from miles away. It was unlike anything

they were used to, and was the holiest site in the Jewish faith. Supposedly it was inlaid with gold and jewels and literally shone in the sunlight.

I can just image this rag-tag bunch of country boys following Jesus to the big city, Jerusalem. It would be like someone being raised in rural Missouri and then going to New York City for the first time.

Imagine going from the corn fields of middle Missouri and then standing in the middle of Times Square, looking up at the skyscrapers, hearing the noise of the traffic, smelling the hot dogs from the street vendors. There is so much to take in that one's senses are overwhelmed. Going to New York City for the first time certainly inspires awe, if nothing else.

So here are the thirteen of them, walking along and discussing the riches and awe-inspiring Temple. But Jesus warns them, "As for the things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another and all will be thrown down." Imagine being told that the sight that just took your breath away, the most magnificent thing you have ever laid eyes on will soon be a pile of rubble.

Imagine standing in New York City the morning of 9/11 and seeing the Twin Towers, the iconic symbol of world commerce and prosperity, come down. If there ever was an apocalyptic image burned into our brains, surely it is of that.

The disciples want to know what signs to look for that will point to the Temple's destruction. And Jesus tells them that there will be false prophets coming and using his name and telling people that the end is near. Jesus says that wars and famines will take place, as will plagues and earthquakes.

He also tells them that things will get very bad for them as they profess their faith in him. They will be betrayed by family and friends, thrown in jail, and taken before kings and governors to justify themselves and their beliefs.

There is a purpose to all of this. This isn't about God being capricious and arbitrary. Jesus tells his disciples that during this time, in the worst

of times they can imagine, they will be given an opportunity to testify to the hope they have in Jesus. It is their hope and their expression of it that give them the endurance needed to get through the awful times ahead. Jesus wants his disciple to be alert, to be watchful, and most of all to not be afraid.

When soldiers go through basic training, they are trained in a skill called situational awareness. Situational awareness is being able to take in everything that is happening, to be aware of everything about the surroundings and what the surroundings and situation might be telling them. When someone is situationally aware, they are best able to make quick life and death decisions about what is needs to be done.

Now, lest you think that this is a not necessary skill to have, I must tell you about an award that has been devised called the Darwin Award. The Darwin Award is given every year and always posthumously. It is given to the individual who has most improved the human gene pool by accidentally taking themselves out of it.¹

The Darwin Award recognizes those individuals that for some reason have little to no situational awareness and wind up doing something incredibly stupid resulting in very bad consequences. The 2009 Award Winners were two bank robbers in Belgium who over estimated the amount of dynamite needed to blow open an ATM machine. They blew up not only the machine, but several buildings surrounding the machine as well as themselves.

I believe that the 2010 Darwin Award should go to a man from St. Louis. His name was Donald Zakrzewski. A month ago, Mr. Zakrzewski, a petty burglar, robbed a home not two miles from here. When he heard the owners come home he ran through their yard, climbed an eight foot fence, ran a little ways through the woods and right off a cliff into a quarry. When he was found the next morning he had on his person not only the jewelry that he stole but also a flashlight, a tool that had he used it would have come in very handy and would have resulted in a far different outcome.

Situational awareness is literally a life and death matter.

¹ www.darwinwards.com

Situational awareness is in contrast to situational apathy.² In situational apathy, nothing is done because the individual believes that whatever action may be taken isn't going to make a difference. What is going to happen is going to happen and nothing I or anyone else does can change that fact...so we choose to do nothing.

This is unchristian; it is cynicism at its worst, and it leads to missed opportunity for carrying out God's mission. We fall into situational apathy when we become overwhelmed by the problems facing us and the world and throw our hands up in futility.

Roberta Bondi, a theologian at Emory University in Atlanta writes, "it is tempting to think that nothing really is done for anybody by seemingly small, everyday things when the problems are so systemic. As my teachers remind me however (and here the teachers she is referring to are the desert mystics), the truth is just the opposite: without little things, there are no big changes."³

Mother Teresa made the same point when she wrote, "we can never do great things. We can only do small things with great love."

Apathy speaks to a loss of hope, and Jesus' message is pure hope. When we take on the mantle of apathy we lose the promise that has been given to us. And we lose the opportunity to do the mission work that God has called us to do.⁴

There is one other camp we can fall into and that is situational obsession. In situational obsession we become paralyzed by the future and our fear of it. We are situationally obsessed when we listen to doomsday preachers, believe in the stories of Armageddon and feel that there is nothing good or holy about the time we are in right now.

We need only remember the likes of Jim Jones and the Jonestown tragedy in the jungle of Guyana in November of 1978, to see how

² Homiletics, November/December 2010 Vol. 22, #6 p. 22

³ Christian Centruy 11/02/04 p. 17

⁴ Brian Stoffregen, Crossmarks website. www.crossmarks.com/Brian/Luke21X5

dangerous situational obsession can be. Situational obsession is driven not by obedience to God, but out of fear of this world.

Situational apathy and situational obsession are not what Jesus desires for us. Jesus was telling his disciples (and we must never forget that when we are listening in on Luke's gospel, we are part of the crowd, we are the ones that Jesus is addressing), that what happens now, today, is always as important as what will happen in the future.

Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if tomorrow was the Day of Judgment. He thought for a minute and then said, "If tomorrow was the Day of Judgment then today I want to plant an apple tree."⁵

Jesus wants us to know that the world is important, that it needs, desperately needs, our attention and our gifts and our care. We have work to do right up until the very last second of this world and we can not quit one second sooner.

When we live in hope, when we keep our eyes and hearts open, when we undergo terrible tragedies and trials we do so in the knowledge that Christ died for us and is with us and as a result we can speak words of hope to others.

Christ lays it on the line with his disciples. He tells us up front how hard it will get. And he also tells us that by keeping focused on God's promises and not what the world promises we will be given the strength to endure and in enduring we will be given our very souls.

Amen.