

Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, November 17, 2019, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA:

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 21:5-19

“Stand Firm in Faith”

When we are experiencing something going on with the weather - a period of rain or drought, cold weather moving in, or between the months of June and December – we got to our weather forecasters, our computers or even our smart-phones and tablets to see all of the pertinent signs to watch for. Nowadays, a lot of people have the weather service app on their phones to track any storm that might be coming up the coast, or the Gulf, or whatever. We have become dependent on these things to alert us of the coming changes. In the first century Israel, the people didn't have such luxuries, they didn't have phones. Communication was 'you – go tell so and so and so.' They had no luxuries, and depended on the things around them, the skies, the winds, and even how the animals reacted. When a storm is coming – does your dog or cat act a little different? These people were searching for signs.

Jesus, having just left the Temple for what would be His last time, went with His Apostles to the Mount of Olives, directly across from the Temple, across the Kidron Valley. The sight of the magnificent Temple was right in front of them, and Jesus prophesied that from that time forward, about forty years later, in what would be 70 AD, the Temple would cease to exist and Jews would be running for their lives from Jerusalem. Jesus tells His followers not to panic, that the end of days was not then but it would come later – and so He adds the prophesy of His second coming later on - in what we call the Olivet Discourse. What Jesus said about the stones being strewn down – if you need proof - all you need to do is take a walk by the southern steps of the Temple Mount. If Marilyn and I lead another trip to Israel, we will take you to the southern step of the Temple count and you will see, through fresh excavation that has taken place, of boulders and blocks that were a part of the Temple and Western Wall. You will find them strewn down on a street on which Jesus once walked. They know that this street was there in the first century and all of the debris is on top of it. The Temple and the city of Jerusalem would never be the same – they were demolished just as Jesus had said. The Jews would now need to reconstruct their lives around the Law, instead of the Temple and the sacrifices. They would ask for signs to know when this was coming, and they got more than they asked for.

I find it very interesting that right after these Gospel verses, in Luke 21:20-21, Jesus clearly prophesies of what is to come for the Temple, and the Jewish people, He says, "*When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city.*" He is talking about the people of Judah, the Jews, who would be scattered into all the world, until the United Nations would declare Israel a county once again. They would be scattered all over the place, and then there are the ones that fled to Masada, the mountain fortress near the Dead Sea, who would be exterminated by the Roman Army.

Jesus' warnings are really meant to encourage the hearers and readers – especially His followers, to stay close to the faith, and continue to share the truth, not being swayed by false

Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, November 17, 2019, Year C

prophets and false messiahs. These warnings are so very important – that they are recorded in not just Luke chapter 21, but also Matthew 24, and Mark 13. They are almost identical. One very important warning is given by Jesus in verse 8 from today's Gospel reading, "*Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them.*" We also need to remember the words Jesus spoke in John 15:16 "*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit -- fruit that will last.*" Jesus is speaking to the people whom He has called, for them to continue in the faith, and not to trust the false ones who proclaim to be "a Christ" or "a messiah," which means "an anointed one" – for He has given the call for us to trust in Him, and not anyone who claims falsely to be Him. Please also remember that before long, the risen Jesus will add encouragement for His disciples when He gives His Great Commission in Matthew 28:20 saying, "*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" The promise to never leave or forsake His followers has to be kept close to the heart, no matter what!

The disciples put two and two together. The warning of the destruction of the Temple on one hand and on the other hand, the evidence of all that Jesus has said and done comes to pass. Somehow they go with each other. If Jesus has been right all along, then the Temple will have to go. But how? And when? When will the world see that Jesus really is God's Messiah? When will the world see that we need Jesus? It would take several hundred years, but eventually even Rome would fall, mighty Rome who conquered all would go down. And the so-called gods or emperors would be seen as false gods. The Truth would be seen. In Greek the word for truth is 'alethea' (ἀλήθεια). John 8:32 says about the truth: "*and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*"

The disciples wanted to see Jesus ruling as King, with all that that would mean, including the Temple's destruction and, then, the ushering in of God's new age – and the promises that Jesus had been telling them. They hoped that the present age would come to its inevitable conclusion, and the new age would be born. Well, Jesus says, the birth pangs of the new age will start, in the form of wars, revolutions, famines and earthquakes. It is not going to be pretty! It hasn't been, has it? I just happen to believe that the end times started when the first nail was driven onto Jesus' hand. That is when the stopwatch started. No one knows the hour or the day, but the Father. Terrible times are going to come, and those who follow Him will be tested severely. There will unfortunately be some who will give it all up as just too demanding. – and give up the faith. We have seen it. But they shouldn't waver or be deceived. There would be people who claimed to be Jesus, who we are not to follow, not by any stretch of the imagination. Unless it is Him – I am not going. Jesus' followers – then and now - must hold on, keep their nerve, and remain faithful, to stand firm in faith. Between the present moment for the disciples, and the time when all will be revealed, Jerusalem will be destroyed, the good news of the kingdom of God which Jesus came to bring will have to spread not just around Israel, but to places like Pearson and Waycross, Douglas and Broxton, but to the whole world. There is much work to be done!

Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, November 17, 2019, Year C

This statement holds true for every generation of Christians, believers in Jesus as the Messiah. We too are called to be faithful, to hold on and to not be alarmed. We too may be called to live through troubled times and to be faithful to the end. We may see the destruction of cherished and beautiful symbols. Think about 9-11, those two beautiful towers, if you ever had the privilege of being up in one of those towers, and now thinking that they are gone. Those were marks of economy, of progress. Our calling is to hold on to Jesus Himself, in relationship with Him, to continue to trust Him, to believe that the One who was justified by God in the first century will one day be justified before the whole world. When He comes again on a cloud, there will be no doubt – that He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We too are called to live with the birth pangs of God's new age, and to trust that in His good time the new world will be born, and He will come again to bring us to it.

Jesus promises that He will provide what we need during this time of waiting, especially *'words and wisdom.'* This promise refers to the times when people will be put on trial for their lives because of their allegiance and belief in Jesus. Think of the early Christians and the persecution that took place, even to Rome and the horrible treatment to people simply because they followed Jesus. Jesus' warnings were given to encourage His followers in any age to come, *"But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves."* (Luke 21:12-14) I only have to think of the Book of Acts, when the Apostles were arrested, and Peter went before the Sanhedrin and the High Priest, and testified about *"Jesus, who you killed."* That is just the beginning. Earlier in Luke 12:11-12, Jesus said these words of encouragement: *"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."* We need to remember that these words – just like His promises, are timeless.

Wherever and whenever Christians are persecuted for their faith – they need the prayers and support of their fellow-believers like us, but also the comfort and encouragement of Jesus' words, *"All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life."* (Luke 21:17-19) It may not be here – but it may be the life after. And so I close with the words from the Brother of Jesus, James from his Epistle, in which he wrote, *"You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."* (James 5:8)