

PENTECOST XXVI, 2018
Hebrews 10.11-25; Mark 13.1-8

Many people, visiting New York City for the first time, are just awe-struck at all the tall buildings. I imagine the disciples in our Gospel reading today were like that: wide-eyed, awe-struck tourists. They were in Jerusalem, the capital and religious center of the nation. Maybe for some it was their first time.

“Look, Jesus,” they said, “what marvelous buildings!” The most magnificent of them all was the great Temple. It was the dwelling place of God, the symbol of the nation, the guarantee of God’s favor and the focus of their patriotism.

Jesus, though, is not impressed. Instead, He sees it coming doom. The day was coming, He tells His disciples, when Jerusalem will be in ruins and the Temple torn down. The disciples only saw the impressive buildings of the city and the sacred Temple as the guarantee of the nation’s security and divine blessing.

Jesus saw below the surface appearances to the real state of the nation, which would result in its doom. The problem was not the invaders at the door, but the rot in the floor. Jesus saw the growing gap between the rich and the rest of society, especially how the wealthy used their power to exploit the poor. A second factor was a zealous nationalism that unchecked would lead to a disastrous conflict with Rome. And last was a false sense of security from the belief that the Temple guaranteed God’s blessing on the people.

Jesus saw what was coming. And, he was right. Forty years later the Jews revolted against the Romans. It was put down; Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. Many Jews were taken to Rome where they became slaves, building the Coliseum.

Jesus it coming. So he warns the disciples in this text: Do not be alarmed. Beware that no one leads you astray. And further on in this chapter: Be alert. In an anxious time, facing an uncertain future, Jesus encouraged His followers to be faithful.

Mark recalled Jesus’ teaching when he wrote this Gospel. Mark was writing to a church facing its own anxious times. Its world seemed to be falling apart. Danger lurked everywhere. Natural and man-made disasters were a constant story. False teachers and false prophets tempted Christians to go astray. Mark’s congregation struggled just to stay afloat and keep its balance.

The situation between the time of Mark’s Gospel – the last third of the First Century – and ours seem similar. We live in anxious times, facing an uncertain future. The challenge is how to live in an age of anxiety, when the foundations of life seem to be falling apart. Rudyard Kipling began a famous poem with the words, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs....” There’s the rub: How do we do that? How do Christians keep their balance in a very tenuous world?

For an answer let’s turn to our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews today:

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...

Now, all this language of “entering the sanctuary,” “hearts sprinkled clean”, priests, etc. sounds strange to our experience. But without going into an extensive Bible study, what this scripture is saying to us is something very basic about our faith:

- Through Jesus we have access to God.
- Through Jesus we have been made righteous. We can face God with a clear conscience.
- Baptism is the foundation of this faith.

First: Through Christ we have access to God's grace, His favor, His Spirit, God's strength. God is as close to you as your Baptism, in His Word in Scripture, preaching, and teaching, in the Eucharist of Christ's body and blood you receive here each week. This is the sure foundation on which the Church of every age has stood.

Have you ever seen those "stress test" quizzes? Each stress in your life is assigned as point value. Losing a child is 100 points, losing a spouse 95, losing a job 90, etc.

A woman was in a doctor's office waiting for her appointment. She picked up a magazine that had one of these tests and scored herself. Her point total was 350 points. The article said for a point total that high she should see her funeral director. But, she felt fine. How was that so, she wondered?

She decided to do a study of how it is that people who experience great stress maintain a healthy outlook on life. Her research identified three main factors:

1. An attitude of hope, rooted in faith and thanksgiving, instead of seeing oneself as a victim. You focus on your resources, not on your weaknesses.
2. The ability to set goals and work to achieve them, instead of simply being passive and helpless.
3. The sense that, even if you cannot control all the circumstances of your life, you can control some things. So, you focus on what you can do, not what you can't.

Having a sense of hope, setting goals, and refusing to see yourself or let others define you as a victim. These factors are true for the Church in an age of anxiety. In Christian terms, it is faith and hope active in love and mission.

Therefore, the writer of Hebrews exhorts: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for God who promised is faithful..." As the

Small Catechism teaches us, explaining the Creed, the Holy Spirit will call, gather, enlighten, make us holy, and keep you in the true Christian faith, just as the Spirit does for the whole Christian Church on earth, until the end of time.

The Church is the people of God through time. Empires have tried to destroy it, yet the Church has outlived them all. Instead of cursing the darkness, the Church is the light of Christ that is the voice of hope from generation after generation. The Church's testimony to the Gospel is the power of life to defeat the forces of darkness and death.

How do we hold fast to our confession of faith in a chaotic world and the darkness of our time? How do we Christians keep our balance in a shaky world? How do we keep our heads when the world about us seems to be losing it?

To borrow a line from the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, I can tell you in one word: "Tradition!" Christian faith rests on a rich foundation of tradition that supports us in following Jesus: Scripture, creed, liturgy, common worship, devotional practices, hymns, the examples of the saints, the calendar of the Christian year, and more. These practices help sustain us in our faith.

So here is the question I would put to anyone who is struggling with their faith: What are the rituals you use every day to support your faith? Rituals are how we pay attention to God (and, for that matter, each other). Like good ritual in a marriage or family, they help sustain faith, even when we don't feel faith or feel like doing it.

There is an old Black spiritual called, *My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord*. Yes, indeed: Your soul was anchored in the Lord when you were baptized into the faith of the Church. Anchor it in God's Word in your life every day. Anchor it in the Holy Sacrament here at the Lord's Table every week. Anchor it in the serving ministry of the Church, bringing God's love to others through deeds of love and mercy. Anchor it in the support of the fellowship of believers, the community of Christ. By this endurance, this anchor, your life will be saved. Amen.