

A                    PENTECOST XXIV

*‘When you hear of war and insurrections, do not be terrified... By your endurance you will gain your souls.’ Luke 21:5, 19*

Jesus’ pronouncements about the end times may sound strange and foreign to our ears today *‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.’*

Well, perhaps the first part of that doesn’t sound so strange at all. *Nation will rise against nation: 9/11. Great earthquakes, famines and plagues. Katrina. The Indonesian tsunami. The BP oil spill. Disasters, natural and human. War and rumors of war. Mother Nature out of control. We are familiar with these signs and portents.*

But signs and portents of what? That’s where the parallels begin to break down. To the ancient world, and to Jesus, these human-made and natural disasters were signs of God’s judgment, God’s plan, God’s preparation for a new heaven and new earth.

Today, we may or may not comprehend human nature any better than the ancients did. We do have a more comprehensive knowledge of history and global events, and of the perduring quality of human aggression. And we do have some scientific understanding of weather patterns and other causes of natural disasters.

Most of us, I think, don’t believe that such phenomenon are ordained and executed by God. Some faith traditions do: those pamphlets with airplanes falling out of the sky – those existed way before any of us could imagine the Twin Towers falling, and are meant to terrify us into conversion.

But we Episcopalians, as a rule, don’t tend to think that way. That’s the part of Jesus’ prediction that we may find hard to swallow. And also, of course, Jesus seems to think the end times are at hand, and yet, 2000 years have passed since he spoke these words. So what are we to do with them here, today?

You know, when 9/11 happened, I didn’t know what to expect of the people of St. John’s. I didn’t know how fearful or angry the community would be. And as I began to write this sermon I looked back to what I had preached on the first Sunday after the attack.

I said, in part,

We gather this morning to help one another, and to allow God to help us, to emerge from the rubble of our human frailty and to celebrate the strength of our community and the mysteries of our faith.

On Tuesday morning, as I watched tragedy displayed on TV I decided quickly that we must have a service of prayer, healing, and Eucharist, and I spent the remainder of the day reading and revising and typing prayers in front of the television. Never have I been more grateful to have a worshipping community to care for and to be cared for by. Never have I been more grateful for the resources of our Prayerbook and its supplements – the words and concepts were all there, thought and felt and written by wise, articulate people, in tranquility and with reflection. Never have I been more grateful for the leadership of St. John's, who did their best to inform the parish that we would gather for worship at 5.00 PM. I feel grateful, as I have felt so often and so overwhelmingly recently, that I serve a congregation that I believe will not succumb to the temptations of prejudice and stigmatizing. And never have I been more grateful for the gathering itself, parishioners, neighbors, friends, the man building the patio next door – we stood and prayed together for ourselves and for the souls of the faithful departed, and received the body and blood of Christ, renewing ourselves for what was to come.

And I was correct: we did not succumb to the temptations of prejudice and stigmatize, nor did we succumb to communal depression, bitterness, or paralysis. We went on. We went on, as it happens, that very morning, to baptize Ardani Mello-Daigneault, Jeff and Paul's son, to affirm our faith in the Risen Christ, the Christ of promise and hope, and to affirm our commitment to uphold the dignity of every human being.

Jesus not only warns of apocalyptic, universal disasters. He makes his dire predictions very personal,

*They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.*

This also may sound strange to modern ears, and is not likely to be something we experience personally. But if you read, as I am, a book called *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches from the Fault Line Between Christianity and Islam*, you will be reminded that everyday Christians – and Muslims, are being slaughtered because of their faith.

We are more likely to be ridiculed for our faith than slaughtered for it. But more likely still, and more challenging for us, is what we say, how we witness to our faith,

when we or our loved ones are facing disaster, tragedy, sorrow, and loss? How do we find courage, strength, and hope for ourselves? How do we offer it to others?

People say to me sometimes that they feel inadequate and uncomfortable when they encounter someone else's sorrow or loss. *I don't know what to say, and you do, they tell me*, as if a seminary education provided some magical formula for offering consolation and hope.

Jesus promises his listeners, *I will give you words and a wisdom*. And to whatever extent I have given hope and comfort to others in times of need, or indeed, when I have found these resources within myself, it's not from my time in seminary, but from Jesus.

*I will give you words and a wisdom (and) ... By your endurance you will gain your souls*. These are words to live by, I believe. These are promises to take away from Jesus' otherwise alarming prophecy: words of challenge, words of hope.

And here's a story. Thomas Dorsey – not Tommy Dorsey, the big band leader – *Thomas* Dorsey was a prolific songwriter and talented gospel and blues musician. Early in his career, he divided his time between playing the piano in nightclubs and theatres, and in churches. Eventually he devoted himself exclusively to the church and church music.

In 1932, Dorsey left his pregnant wife in Chicago to travel to St Louis and be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting. After the first night, he received a telegram: *Your wife just died*. He hastened home to discover that his wife had died in childbirth after giving birth to a son, who died the next day himself. Dorsey buried them both in the same casket, and then withdrew in sorrow and agony from his family and friends. For some time he did not compose or play.

But one day, sitting at the piano, a feeling of peace washed over him. He heard a melody in his head, and began to play it on the piano.