

## Things Penultimate

### Proper 28, Year C - Luke 21:5-19

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, November 13, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Welcome to the penultimate celebration of the Church Year! I like that word, penultimate: the best, only not *quite*. Or as in this case, the last celebration, only not just yet. Next week we will end the Year by dressing the church up in white for our celebration of the Feast of Christ the King. But *this* week, we take one more green opportunity to listen to Jesus teach his disciples about how things *work* in the Kingdom. As human beings, I think, but perhaps *especially* as modern *American* human beings, the privileged heirs at the top 1% of the world's power and resources, we like to focus on *ultimate* things. But here this week, we are asked by the cycle of the Church Year, to hold up just a bit longer, and to think about the things that are *pen*-ultimate.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus and the disciples, the twelve and whoever else, like *us*, have continued to travel with him on his long journey, they have finally come to Jerusalem, the city to which Jesus set his face so many chapters in the story before, the city that kills the prophets. Having made their way through the cramped and crowded streets, they enter the precincts of the great Temple of God, from contemporary descriptions of devout Jews and pagans alike, one of the most magnificent centers of worship and sacrifice in the ancient world.

*Someone* makes a remark about the beauty of the temple. Perhaps it's one of the disciples, or maybe it's some rubber-necking pilgrim on his or her first trip into Jerusalem from one of the outlying provinces. The on-looker oohs and aahs out loud at the splendor of the massive stones, at how wonderful it is that all of this has been done to the glory of God, and maybe starts up a chorus of "How Lovely Are Thy Dwellings." Jesus turns and states what should be obvious, "The time will come when there won't be a stone left standing on stone." "The holiest ground you know," he tells them, "will tumble down around you."

Now, from a purely *physical* level, Jesus didn't have to be a clairvoyant to make this prediction. Over the thousand years since David the King had claimed the hill of Zion, one temple had been built on top of the ruins of another. The *first* Temple, built by Solomon to replace a *tent* as the focal point of the People's relationship with God Almighty, *that* Temple was leveled as the leading citizens of Jerusalem were hauled away to Babylon. When the exiles finally returned to the Promised Land, they built another temple, using the ruins of the first. But within three centuries, this so-called "Second Temple" had fallen victim to the pressures of advancing Hellenism. The beauty of the Temple that Jesus and that oohing and aahing pilgrim knew, had only come into being in the generation before Jesus was born. And *Herod's* Temple barely survived Jesus' own life, before being torn to pieces at the end of Rome's tolerance with Jewish stubbornness. Jesus knew, even *without* the benefit of divine foresight, that the Temple in Jerusalem was *doomed* to fall from the very minute the first stone was lain on stone.

But of course, Jesus is *also* speaking to the broader truth that *every* temple we build is inevitably a doomed house. Every structure for housing the eternal, every attempt to enclose the holy, every system, concept, or *person* we set up as somehow of *ultimate*, will *surely* be exposed as *pen*-ultimate at best. Name any temple you like, any altar built stone by stone in our heart, any ground that is sacred to us because, in one way or another, we have found there what we thought was ultimate truth. Maybe it's a church, or a neighborhood, or a denomination. Maybe it's a family, or a friendship, or a vocation. Maybe it's a passion, or a memory, or a dream. Maybe it's a plan, or a program... or a political party. *All* of these, will falter and fail. *All* of these will disappoint and die. *All* of these, some *way*, some *time*, will

show themselves to be not nearly, not *nearly* as ultimate as we had set them up to be. And *every* such temple will crumble.

Our temples may be overrun by the systematic attack of forces outside ourselves that are hateful or derisive or apathetic to whatever sense of ultimate *we* have experienced. Our temples may die of natural causes, ceasing to exist for us as we move on to something else, or simply outgrow their usefulness. Our temples may crumble because by our contempt, or our sloth, or our busy-ness, we neglect them until they simply *rot* out from under us. Our temples may collapse because we encumber them with impossible expectations, trying to manage and spin the ultimate truth, trying to put ultimate reality in our all-too-tiny boxes, trying to turn our idolatrous ultimate into the ultimate.

In our own age the landscape is *littered* with such fallen temples. It seems sometimes that we feel the tremors and see the stones falling from every temple we know. Our landscape too often is ablaze with the smoldering ruins of fallacious promises, failed programs, and fallen personalities.

We have every reason to mourn such endings, to grieve the loss of things precious to us. *And*, by the way, we have every reason to allow *others* to mourn and grieve *their* losses. But the only *ultimate* truth is that which rises from the *ruins* of the *pen*-ultimate. The calcified temples we have built for ourselves in our hearts must be brought down – to make room for billowing tents of God’s glory. Hearts of stone must be broken – to give way to hearts of living flesh, hearts as soft and supple as when we were first baptized, hearts in which the Spirit of the living God can breathe and blow afresh into our lives. For it is in that rebirth, in that renewal, in that *resurrection*, that we finally find the *ultimate* reality, the reality of Christ’s love.

The time will come, Jesus taught his disciples, the twelve and whoever else, like us, have continued to travel with him on our long journey, the time will come “when not one stone will be left upon another.” The time will come when time and space and everything in it are rolled back like a scroll. The time will come when *every* thing we *thought* was *ultimate*, is exposed for the *pen*-ultimate nothings they really are.

The time will come when the fullness of the Kingdom of God will be made fully known, when the *real* elect will gather around Heaven’s Throne, and the wolf and the lamb will feed together. In the meantime, in the *meantime*, we who have known the love of Christ, in the meantime, we who carry that love in our hearts, in the meantime, we who have been called to *share* that love, with the whole *world*, *and* with the one right in front of us who we have so hard a time seeing as *worthy* of our love, remembering that the ground is level at the foot of the Cross. In the meantime, between now and the Glory around the Throne of Heaven, we must look *beyond* the penultimate distractions of this world, to put Jesus Christ, and him *only*, on the throne of *our hearts*.