

A Firm Foundation

Several years ago, Heather, Allison and I visited Robert Schuler's Chrystal Cathedral in Orange County, California. Some of us may remember the Chrystal Cathedral's worship services on television – a glorious, steel and glass worship space that seated thousands and had one of the finest organs in the country. The campus itself was composed of seven different buildings with an enormous parking lot.

And yet, when we visited the Chrystal Cathedral, it was in shambles. The stadium seats were torn and tattered. The walls were in disrepair. The paint was peeling off the walls. The flooring was filthy and cracked. The campus was collapsing due to a lack of maintenance. Members began leaving the church in droves. Things got so bad that the once-magnificent Chrystal Cathedral declared bankruptcy, the few remaining members abandoning the property, with the campus being auctioned and sold to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange.

In our gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples encounter a building that was even more substantial than any place of worship now in existence in our country. The Temple, being rebuilt by Herod the Great, was the center of the Jewish nation and at the heart of its faith. The immense wealth that was put into its construction made it one of the wonders of the world. The eastern front and part of the side walls were covered with gold plate, flashing in the sun, and the rest was covered with gleaming white marble, which, from a distance, made it appear to be a mountain of snow.

The complex was magnificent. The disciples themselves were enamored by the grandeur. They must have thought, "This building will last to the end of time. It is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven."

But what they saw was not what Jesus saw. Beneath that solid appearance was the reality of change and decay. "As for these things that you see," Jesus says, "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

Jesus was right. Go to Jerusalem today and you will not find the great Temple that Herod built. You will find instead a collection of stones, all in a

jumble, making up a wailing wall. Jews go there to pray and weep for their devastated Temple.

Luke 21 is part of what we call “the little Apocalypse” –those strange parts in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus speaks about the end times – the end of the world, the end of history, the end of life as we know it.

Jesus told his disciples not to place their trust in the Temple because eventually it would become a ruin. Herod’s Temple, that great, solid building meant to last forever would be destroyed in less than forty years.

This is a difficult Gospel to accept. Apocalyptic talk is not our language. We don’t resonate with talk of cataclysm and catastrophe. We Episcopalians like things “decently and in order,” set in place, without chaos or confusion. The problem is: the world is not that way. Rumbles and shake-ups are part of life. Change happens whether we like it or not. Sometimes the changes are truly earthshaking and deeply disturbing. I like the way the writer Joan Didion put it: “When the ground starts shaking, all bets are off.” Nothing lasts forever. After all, if a Temple, built to last for a thousand years with stones two tons thick, didn’t last forever, what would?

When Heather and I moved to San Diego and bought a house, we had to put on a new roof. The old roof was wood shingles, but the new roof would be red tiles made from concrete. The roofer assured me, “These tiles will last at least fifty years.” Then the roofer added: “These tiles will last longer than you will.” Friends, it does something to you to know that a tile roof is more immortal than you are.

I still remember from high school reading Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem *Ozymandias*. I think every politician should read and digest that poem. A traveler goes to an antique land where he encounters the ruins of an ancient empire now engulfed in sand. On one of the stones buried in the sand is written the words, “I am Ozymandias, King of Kings. Look upon my works ye mighty and despair!” Shelley then adds, “Nothing beside remains.”

Isn’t that how it is with all our monuments – the great temples at Luxor, Hitler’s grand stadium at Nuremberg, the Acropolis at Athens, the crumbling and looted pyramids at Giza, and the Coliseum in Rome? Not much

withstands the ravages of time, the tremors of history. If a great, strong building like the Temple will not endure, what hope is there for us?

There is a reason we build our government and university buildings to look like temples – just look at the National Cathedral or the federal buildings in Washington. We want our buildings to appear hundreds of years older than they really are, because we expect them to be around hundreds of years after us. And Jesus says all of this is a lie. It melts down, breaks down, disintegrates, and turns to dust.

So where is our hope?

After delivering his somber words about the future of the Temple, Jesus says something startling to his disciples: “Look up! Your redemption is drawing near.”

Perhaps our redemption begins with the simple admission that we need to be saved. The source of our hope begins in admitting that we are without hope by our own efforts. If Jesus doesn’t raise the dead and give life to the dying, then we are without hope. Our buildings and monuments, our government institutions, our colleges and universities, our hospitals, and medical centers, and even our political parties won’t save us.

The good news is that when the world changes around us, God does not change. The author of Hebrews says, “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). When the ground starts shaking beneath your feet, keep in mind we have a firm foundation on which to stand – Jesus Christ. When events disappoint us, Jesus remains faithful. When life breaks our heart, Jesus is there to comfort us. When everything we cherished falls apart, Jesus is there to help us pick the pieces and move on with our life. And even when death claims us, as it surely will, Jesus is there to give us life and bring us home to heaven.

This past Tuesday we celebrated Veterans’ Day. Over the years I have come to know and respect many people who have served in the military. One of those individuals was my college friend Conrad. As the Vietnam War was raging, Conrad dropped out of college in his second year to join the Army. Just as he was about to deploy to Vietnam, he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. He would die as a soldier, but not on the battlefield.

Conrad was an ordinary guy, but there was something heroic about his death. When I visited him in the hospital, I asked, “Aren’t you angry about what’s happening to you? Don’t you feel cheated in life?” Gently, Conrad replied, “You see, Gary, it’s like this. The tumor is in my head, but not in my heart.”

Conrad admitted he was forced into a journey he did not want to take. And yet, he said to me, “I feel closer to God than I have ever felt in my life. The chaplain gave me the last rites yesterday, and I feel ready for whatever happens next. I know I’m going to be okay.”

Can we, as we watch the breakdown of so many things that we hold dear, of so many things in which we put our trust, can we reach out to Christ for redemption, lean on him, depend on him, and rest secure in his love? Can we say, with the hymnwriter: “Change and decay in all the world I see, / O thou who changest not, abide with me”?¹

When the world fails you, God does not fail. In Jesus is our hope, and in none other.

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Proper 28, C
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1. Henry Francis Lyte, “Abide with Me” in *Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Publishing Co.) 662.