

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 28

Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

November 18th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Judgment for Stepping into It

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

So after hearing an apocalyptic gospel like that, I have to wonder, are we Christians a bit crazy? It's not the sort of text that would have all of Mill Valley clamoring to get in our doors, is it?

The people who selected today's lectionary are not here this morning to argue what reasoning they had when they clipped this passage out of Luke for our reflection. So an unanswered question this week that stuck with me following our Wednesday Bible dialogue: why is the historical context of this passage eliminated? Does it suggest that apocalypse is for all time? Or does placing it in its proper place in world history make it somehow less. . . or more true. . . than we might want in all of our very human complex of denial?

The verse that immediately follows the conclusion of this morning's Gospel reading is this: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near." There you have it: apocalypse now for the first-century Christian community that Luke was writing for. The sack of Jerusalem, 70 A.D., stands at the beginning of our spiritual tradition and marks a dividing line for Judeo-Christian history that cannot be overstated. Beyond it, looking backwards, is an obscure time from which few texts contemporary with Jesus and his earliest followers survive. Scholars and theologians across the board agree that our knowledge of our deepest roots as a Christian people is scarred irrevocably by the sack of Jerusalem.

But back to the contemporary day, and starting with the Church. . . since All Hallows' Eve, a bishop of the Episcopal Church has been inhibited while unspeakably awful charges are prepared for consideration in ecclesiastical court, other bishops have been warned about leading their dioceses into schism, which has led to a melee of public sniping; and in Fairfax, Virginia, the largest property dispute in the history of our Church began in open civil court. At question is the disposition of assets held by eleven parishes that have members who have voted to leave the Episcopal Church to become part of the Church of Nigeria.

When nothing else can be reconciled, we turn to the measurable, quantifiable, and tangible and try to protect the interests of those who wish to remain part of the historic Church. There is nothing else, it seems, left to be won. Indeed at times it is easier to leave than keep the vows and stand face-to-face with perceived heresies or perceived enemies. The only question now seems to be about who and what we can take with us if we decide to go.

A few bishops bent on leading their dioceses out of the Episcopal Church appealed in recent days to the history of the Church during the Civil War as precedence for their actions. But step back with me for a moment from considering the historical accuracy or lack of same in that comparison. Just ask what the comparison itself says about where we are in the sad thick of things: a "church at war," indeed. Underscoring this was an e-mail I received this morning (from the HoB/D list) that said armed guards were at hand for a Convention Eucharist held yesterday in the Diocese of Fort Worth.

On September 5th, your Vestry elected me Rector. Overwhelmed as I have been with the blessedly more mundane and indeed joyous occasions both past and upcoming here at Church of Our Saviour, I paused to catch my breath while it seems all hell broke loose in the wider church. In one sense it's a great blessing to be here in a parish that is showing many signs of strength and growth. In another, it's tempting to feel a bit as those of us who have stepped into this body we call the Episcopal Church gather this season at the edge of broader chaos. In a profound way, our Jerusalem is burning, too, and no one's quite sure what will rise from the ashes – a bit of ecclesiastical apocalypse for us, one that I feel somehow Christ and the early Christian community would understand. Given what they lived through, perhaps they would chide us for our hand-wringing in the present hour!

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Hiroko and I took advantage of a friend's visit this week and her willingness to look after Daniel for a few hours to go see *Lions for Lambs*, the new Robert Redford social and political commentary. The film was beat out at the box office last weekend by *Bee Movie*, a sarcastic and true-to-form Jerry Seinfeld animated comedy.

A lot of critics panned *Lions for Lambs*. "Backbendingly liberal," one remarked, reducing the film to a fanatically partisan caricature. I suppose we could argue whether or not that was deserved, but that's not really the point of my sermon today. Another opined, as I understand it, that the film left too many open ends in its plot and settles nothing. Well, I think after seeing it myself, So what? Isn't that where we are right now as a nation and world: unsettled. . . at loose ends?

In *Lions for Lambs*, a jaded political science professor confronts one of his brightest students about to go over the edge into a life of comfortable apathy: frat-parties, a C average, and eventually a good paying job to subsidize the Benz or what-have-you. . .he confronts his student with the brutal apocalyptic truth of our age: "Rome is burning. . .while we fiddle around it." Yep, it's apocalyptic stuff all right, and it steps into it without apology. Liberal or conservative or neither, it's meant to grab our attention. It speaks to the heart of our contemporary apocalypse.

Bee Movie is about a bee who flies out into the world and kind of, but not really, falls for a human being, and rakes in the dough – er, honey. But when I took my own four-year-old to see it, he turned to me about halfway through and asked to go home. So I don't know how it ended. Not that I need to. Daniel doesn't either. But Seinfeld and DreamWorks made the big bucks last weekend and won some critical praise for their unerring *unwillingness* to step into it – for being so wittily harmless that it even turned off my four-year-old. And that's saying something.

One critic said children would enjoy the film's "eye-popping colors" while adults would enjoy the Seinfeld humor. Mine didn't, and I didn't, quite honestly. And I wonder what it says about our culture and national community that this movie made the big bucks while serious, provocative commentary on the pressing moral questions of our time gets a scathing pass.

Boy, Jesus can be scary sometimes. His sort of film isn't *Bee Movie*, either, it seems to me. He doesn't avoid the painful questions, nor does he promise protection from the precipice we see all around. Life itself teaches that we are not necessarily shielded from those calamities that we hope, like the author of Isaiah, will pass over us or our children. We are called to look into the heart of our worst fears with truth. Yes, to see Jerusalem and Rome burning in awful technicolor, close up with surround sound pipelined at broadband speed, and yet we are called to adamantly refuse to lose heart.

Jesus says to us today that all of this conflict and strife will come to pass. It's bound to sooner or later. We live all the time on the edge of a burning city, often metaphorical, sometimes literal. We Christians are children of apocalypse. We step into it with our baptism. Jesus Christ, in a profound way, was born into it. He died by its hand. He rose again into it.

God stepped into it with a judgment so profound it cannot be encapsulated in words, but we live into it each time we approach the altar with outstretched hands and call a scant mouthful of bread Life and a sip of ho-hum table wine Grace. And then we turn around and call ourselves the Body of Christ and step back into the apocalypse. We face death, disagreement, and division again and again, trusting that somehow we will rise to new and more abundant life. Hoping against hope. Refusing to bury our heads in the sand or give up the enterprise of seeking truth for ourselves and others even when it's muddy, gray, and elusive. We sing "Alleluia" at death and swear on a cross that stands for God in our midst. We pray in the face of all the calamity that life and the universe sets before us and shout "Hosanna!" to a Person who predicted times of destruction for us.

Are we crazy? You tell me. This is not the stuff of altar calls, really. Indeed, it doesn't have the general populace of Mill Valley hammering down our doors. It doesn't inspire us to break out our wallets and fork it over, thinking we're buying our safety or safety for our children. It makes the critics scoff that we are intractably liberal or conservative or both at the same time. It makes the artists and comics spout age-old cynicism about the Church.

Maybe all this talk about schism and war is all too "out there" for you this week. Maybe the only conflict you're willing and able to engage this week is the arrival of relatives and old, well-worn family and personal dynamics working their way around the Thanksgiving turkey. So be it. "Good," as my spiritual director often says quite simply, when I announce I'm in crisis mode. Do the work of the Gospel there – remember the call to love self and neighbor as the old and familiar emotional wars erupt. Take the hits and the hopes with a dash of equanimity. Laugh when you remember that Jesus told you that conflict both inner and intra was bound to happen and look for the wisdom he promises you in today's Gospel. And remember Jesus' counsel not to prepare your defense in advance!

Rome is burning. Jerusalem is burning. At home and abroad. Step into it. Our Savior says, "So what?" I am here, he says. I will provide wisdom, he promises. You will be hauled up and hated. Yeah, says our God, I get it. Me, too! Just the same, come to table, all, and eat. Hold your heads up. Keep the hope alive as sung in the poetry of Isaiah. The ancient poetry about lambs and lions living peaceably together, not one sacrificed for the other. Avoid the apathetic idleness Paul warns the tender church in Thessalonica against; the apathetic idleness that a sometimes arrogant and often controversial figure (someone not terribly unlike Paul) warns the up and coming generation against. Work indeed, as though it all depends on you. Pray like heaven and hell together that it all depends on God in Christ Jesus. Laugh and poke fun at our silly and vapid ways like Seinfeld. And find the breath of the Spirit in our midst, dancing the dance of rebirth and resurrection. And let's all hang in there together even when we strenuously disagree, singing songs for brighter days ahead: the hope we will seek together in Advent. And the strength that is given us as a people of faith; given not for ourselves alone, but to share with one another and a world in need.

Amen.