

Proper 28 B (24th Sunday after Pentecost)

November 15, 2009

1 Samuel 1:4-20; Cantic: The Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10); Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

“Paint what you see,” and “drawing and painting is about awareness,” my painting teacher says. Doesn’t leave it at that or leave us to flounder, but helps us to see what is in front of us, with clearer sight. Teaches us, by critiquing our work and also, through his own work and the work of other painters, showing us what it is to see more clearly, with deeper perception.

“Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”

“Do you *see* these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” (Mk. 13:1-2, emphasis added)

Coming out of the temple where Jesus has just been teaching and disputing with the temple authorities, all this disciple can see is the temple’s grandeur. And it *was* grand, an architectural wonder much admired in the Roman world. But Jesus has seen beyond the grandeur. Soon he will help his disciples to see with clearer, deeper sight, too.

As we approach the end of the Church year, we have jumped ahead a bit in the Gospel. We are in the last week before the crucifixion and resurrection now. Jesus has recently entered Jerusalem in triumph (in ch. 11). Most of the action since has revolved around the temple:

On the first night he entered the temple and “looked around at everything,” taking it all in. (11:11)

The next morning, he entered the temple again and drove out the sellers and buyers of sacrificial animals, turned over the tables of money changers, and accused the temple authorities of making God’s house “a den of robbers.” (11:15-17)

Further angered, the chief priests and scribes “kept looking for a way to kill him” (11:18)

Though they have challenged him—“By what authority are you doing these things?”—he has stayed and taught in the temple. He has disputed with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians and a scribe—religious and political leaders, all—until they have been silenced by his answers. (11:27-28; Chapter 12.)

Now he has left the temple, for the last time, and predicted its end: “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

After they'd crossed the valley to the Mount of Olives, his closest disciples—Peter, James, John (with him at the Transfiguration), Andrew (Peter's brother)—ask him, “Tell us, when . . . and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” They've been thinking it over, drawing inferences, trying to see what he sees, and what it means.

They ask, not “When?” or “What will be the sign that these things are about to *happen?*” but when will they be *accomplished*. As if they've seen or guessed that there may be some *purpose*, some *end* or meaning in the temple's destruction.

If the temple were destroyed, that would be a catastrophe, the end of life as they knew it, for the twelve and all Jews. The temple was a more powerful symbol of identity and meaning than any monument in Washington, D.C., or anywhere else; more important than any locus of financial or other power anywhere. It was the dwelling place of the Holy One, beacon for pilgrims come to make offerings to God and sacrifices for sins so they might draw near to God.

To have some idea of when it was to happen, how they would know, and what they were to make of it would give the disciples some reassurance and hope.

The text speaks beyond the time of Jesus and the disciples, as well, to the community of Mark who, at the end of the 1st century CE witnessed the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Those events ended the armed Jewish Revolt against Rome. (64-70 CE) Not one stone was left upon another.

Mark's early church community may have been in Galilee, where Jesus had told the disciples they would see him after he was raised up (see 14:28; 16:7); but even from a distance the destruction of the temple was shattering. Some scholars believe that it was this event that prompted the writing of the Gospel. What did it all mean? Where was it leading? Was this the *end*?

The text speaks into our time, as well. We, too, witness and experience shattering events that threaten to plunge us into fear and confusion. We, too, live in a time of wars and rumors of wars that, though we may not be in the midst of them ourselves, have an impact on our lives and our hearts. We hear about explosions in far-off Iraq or Afghanistan, see their effects on the news, and the faces of our countrymen and -women who have died there. We hear of a shooting on a military base in Texas, and are shaken. We are aware of those wounded in body, mind and spirit being treated nearby, at Walter Reed and the Naval Hospital.

Earthquakes, famines, climate change, natural disasters of all kinds, including signs of a “toxic chemical stew” in the waters of the Potomac with the appearance of

altered “inter-sex” fish¹. Could these be signs of The End, or the end of life as we have known or imagined it?

That seems to be what Peter and the others concluded about the prospect of the temple’s destruction. And, while we know that that event, and the many acts of violent destruction, wars, persecutions and disasters since, were not the end, still we worry; we worry that humanity may be making an end to much of creation and even ourselves. And if this should slip our mind, there are always new disaster movies to refresh the memory: *e.g.*, the now classic “Independence Day,” and the new “2012.”

But on the Mount of Olives, Jesus’ response to the disciples questions was, “Beware that no one leads you astray,” and “do not be alarmed . . . The end is still to come. . . . This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” (13:5, 7, 8) Clearly, he sees something that they, and even we, may not yet see so clearly.

It’s not that doesn’t care, or doesn’t know how hard it can be to stay centered, faithful and hopeful in the midst of earth-shaking events. He knows how shattering the destruction of the temple and all the violence and losses to come will be in the dark night of history and in individual lives. But he also sees and knows to the core of his being that in and by the shattering of his own life, the new thing of God is accomplished and begins.

Not the fall of Jerusalem, not any or all the other violence and destruction down through time have any ultimate meaning or power, though they do have undeniably present effects. The ultimate meaning and reality, though, are in God’s action, God’s end (*telos*), which is judgment, justice, mercy, peace.

We began this morning with Hannah, whose world was shattered, by a *non-event*, *no birth pangs* and *no birth*. Though her husband loved and valued her for herself, as she looked to the future, she saw only emptiness. Looking back, we might see that Hannah’s longing was also God’s longing for Israel, for new birth and transformation. When Samuel was born, Hannah was able to see that the birth of this child meant much more than her own fulfillment. She saw deeply into the purpose—the *end*—of God: to right inequities of power and wealth, to raise the poor and needy from dust and ashes to places of honor; to put an end to everything that rebels against God.

How do we live in the meantime, until this end that God intends is accomplished? Jesus says, don’t be led astray. Don’t be led astray by other, competing claims to ultimate meaning and reality; don’t settle for meaning that’s “good enough” to get by on even though you know it’s really a lie. Don’t fall into despair; don’t buy the lie that there is no end, no purpose. *Don’t get sucked in by any*

¹“‘Toxic stew’ of chemicals blamed for intersex fish in Potomac,” David A. Fahrenthold, *The Washington Post*, Thursday, November 12, 2009, B4.

of that, says Jesus. Keep your eyes open, stay awake, watch for signs of my presence, even now.

In the language of family systems theory, we might say, *detach from the darkness of the world, with love.*

In the language of Buddhist thought, we might say, *practice non-attachment, with compassion.*

The things of this world, no matter how marvelous, grand, or beloved, will all pass away, quietly or violently. Too much attachment will spell our undoing, the loss of our very selves, when those things are lost or destroyed.

But don't turn your back on the world or withdraw from it. Stay centered enough to be of some use, in the meantime. No one knows when God's end/purpose for creation will be accomplished. It has been a very long time, and may be a very long time still.

In the meantime, stay together. Encourage each other, even "provoke each other to love and good deeds," writes author of the Letter to the Hebrews. "And all the more as you *see* the Day approaching." As you see with sight restored and deepened in community, in the Sacrament, in the practice of prayer, and in the holy Scriptures that God has caused to be written for our learning.

"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."

Lord, heal and transform our sight that we may see your grace and presence in one another and in all the light and darkness of our own lives and of the world.
Amen.