

tearing the curtain
a sermon preached on the
twenty-sixth sunday after pentecost
18 November 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by dr muriel porter

The lections: Daniel 12: 1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10: 11-14, 19-25; Mark 13: 1-11

The opening scene of today's Gospel is quite poignant. The 'country bumpkin' disciples, down from the hill country of Galilee visiting the 'big smoke' of Jerusalem, were clearly awed and overwhelmed by the Jerusalem temple. "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

And no wonder they were excited. The temple was something to see indeed. King Herod the Great, King of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth – yes, the very one who ordered the murder of the baby boys – had massively embellished and extended the temple, itself the second temple on the site. He doubled its size, so that it was the largest sacred site in the Roman Empire. The first century Jewish historian Josephus described it as a place of extraordinary beauty. He wrote: "The exterior of the building wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from solar rays. To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white".¹

Yes, so grand, and yet, within a few decades, in the year 70 of the Common Era, Jesus' prediction had come to pass. This magnificent building was razed to the ground during the terrible calamity of the Jewish war, when the Romans brutally crushed a Jewish revolt against their rule.

Little was left of the temple, the main part that survived being the western retaining wall. Now known as the wailing wall, it is where Jews gather to pray and yes, to wail for the ancient loss of their central religious icon. For the temple was never rebuilt; the huge seventh-century 'Dome of the Rock' mosque now dominates its site, the Temple Mount.

And more than the temple was destroyed. The whole sacrificial system of Judaism that had functioned in the temple, and the priesthood that had governed it, were destroyed too. The destruction of the temple effectively destroyed the way Judaism had been practiced for generations. Since then, Jewish worship has been based in synagogues, overseen by rabbis – fundamentally teachers – rather than a priestly caste.

What an extraordinary, almost unimaginable, change. There are few modern equivalents to help us grasp the enormity of what happened.

The change was much more significant however than the loss of a grand, iconic building, and a priestly caste. The vast temple complex comprised multiple courts that led to the temple itself, the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest was allowed, and then only on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement. The Holy of Holies housed the ark of the covenant; it was believed to be the place where God's presence dwelt.

The temple courts demonstrated that the temple was, for all its grandeur, a place of exclusion – exclusion, effectively, from God. The first, outer, court was the court of the gentiles, that is, non-Jews. They were not allowed to go any further than that. The next was the court of the women – that was as far as they could go. The next was the court of the Israelites, as far as ordinary Jewish men could go – the limit ironically for Jesus himself, and for his disciples. Then came the court of the priests – and then, at the centre, the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could go.

¹ Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War*, Book Five, Chapter 5:222-223

Entry to that central sacred place was barred by a curtain. And it was no flimsy sheer! It was massive, and absolutely magnificent, according to ancient sources – rich in blue, purple and scarlet, and intricately woven with images of cherubim. It was seen as the gateway to heaven. This was the curtain that the Gospels tell us was torn from top to bottom at the time of Jesus’ death.²

That tearing of the curtain symbolised the gate of heaven swinging open to receive Jesus, but also the end of separation from God. It is this that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews understood, as we have heard read today. The unknown author wrote: “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)”. For the writer, Jesus’ flesh, torn on the cross, opened the gate of heaven *for us all*. The writer continues that, “since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”. In other words, now we can all enter the presence of God. No one is excluded. Through Jesus, we can all approach God with full confidence.

That is quite extraordinary if we pause to think about it. It is the revolution in the human faith journey that the destruction of the temple symbolises. We are the beneficiaries of that revolution, even if most of the time we are only dimly aware of it. We who have grown up in the Christian faith – we who were sprinkled clean with pure water in our baptism into Christ – can so easily take for granted this standing invitation into God’s presence. We tend to rush in unthinkingly. Most of the time we do not approach God in awe and wonder.

But as Jesus explained to his disciples as he predicted the destruction of the temple, his new order would require serious commitment. His new creation would be like a birth – yes, new life, but new life that only comes about through pain and hard labour! But though his followers would face persecution, they would not be on their own, and they would not need to worry, because God the Holy Spirit would be with them. Even in this new, puzzling, frightening world, they would be safe – there would be hope.

Today’s Gospel readies us for the season of Advent, now just around the corner, when we will contemplate the great themes of life and death and eternity as we prepare for the birth of the Incarnate God, who turned the world upside down. We are standing on the brink.

It is unfortunate that this season in the Church’s Year comes at a time when our society is consumed by the annual excesses of partying and shopping and eating and end-of-year frenzy. It is hard to focus on the serious demands of our faith, and to stand still in awe that we ordinary mortals have been invited into God’s presence. But it is an invitation to treasure and delight in, and deserves at least a little reflection whenever we can in these hectic weeks. Hold fast to that great good news, and rejoice!

² Matthew 27:51a; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45