

33rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR B)

On first reading, today's gospel is a bit difficult to interpret. Jesus seems to be warning his disciples that the end of the world is imminent. In fact, he tells them that before their own generation passes away, heaven and earth will pass away. But Jesus spoke those words two thousand years ago, and we know that certainly the earth is still here, so was Jesus wrong in his prediction? As always, this is where the context of Jesus' life and words need to be taken into consideration if we are to understand better what he is talking about.

Like many religions in the Ancient Near East, the Jewish people regarded their Temple as a miniature replica of the world, and this can be found in the writing of the Old Testament and in Jewish traditions that link the temple and the world closely together.¹ So for, example:

- Both the Jewish Temple and the world are the place of God's rest. Genesis tells the story of how, after the week-long construction of the world, "*God rested from all his work which he had done in creation.*" Likewise, when God established order and gave the Israelites "rest" from their enemies, He commissioned the building of the Temple by King Solomon as his "*resting place for ever.*"²
- Both the Jewish Temple and the world have the symbolism of the number seven. God's creation of the world is described (in the book of Job, and by the prophet Amos) as being the construction of a Temple that is completed and blessed on the seventh day. Similarly, Solomon built the Jerusalem Temple in seven years and dedicated it in the seventh month during the seven days of the Feast of Booths.³
- They are both a House of Glory. Isaiah, for example, had a vision of the Lord in which the Jewish Temple and the universe are mutually and interchangeably filled with divine glory. As the train of God's robe "filled the temple" and God's house is "filled with smoke", so the angels cry out "*the whole earth is full of his glory.*"⁴
- And finally, the temple and the universe are closely linked in Jewish tradition. Jewish writers of Jesus' day describe in great detail the Temple as a model of the universe. And later Jewish writings even interpret the Temple's divisions, furniture, colours and architecture as symbols of the universe. So, for example, the Holy of Holies in the centre is like heaven, the inner courtyard is like the land, and the outer courtyard is like the sea.

All this, then, helps to make sense of Jesus' words today in their historical context. Jesus is not talking primarily about the destruction of the world, but rather he is prophesying the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. For this reason, today's gospel is part of what is sometimes called the "Little Apocalypse" because Jesus is speaking about the imminent destruction of that smaller world. And ancient sources confirm his prophecy: we know that the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70.

But what relevance does all that have for us today? Well, with the coming of Christ and the New Covenant, the Old Temple gave way to a new and everlasting spiritual temple established by Christ himself - the Church, built with the living stones of us Christian believers.⁵ In this light, the devastation of the Jerusalem Temple and the judgment of Israel in A.D. 70 points also to the eventual destruction of the whole visible universe, God's macro-temple, and the judgment of all nations by Christ.⁶

¹ See Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, *The Gospel of Matthew*, "End of the World?" p. 60.

² Genesis 2:3; 2 Samuel 7:12-13; Psalm 132:14.

³ Job 38:4-6; Amos 9:6; Genesis 2:2-3; 1 Kings 6:38, 8:2, 8:65.

⁴ Isaiah 6:1-7.

⁵ Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5.

⁶ Cf. 2 Peter 3:5-7.

So while Jesus' words in today's gospel were initially fulfilled in the first century as he prophesied, imbedded also in his words are truths that also point forward to his Second Coming in glory and the end of this visible world as we know it. We are reminded to not become too engrossed in this passing world, but rather to remain focused upon our life of faith, and to have our hearts set upon the Kingdom of God which, unlike this world, will never pass away.

God bless,

Fr Andy