

## Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year B

Daniel 12:1-3

Letter to the Hebrews 10:11-14, 18

Gospel of Mark 13:24-32

Two historically tragic moments are burned into the collective memory of every devout Jew to this day. One of these events happened in 586 BC, and the other occurred in 70 AD. Even though there is over 600 years difference between these two events, they have one common element between them—the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. In 586 BC, the first Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Chaldeans. Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed, and the Judean region was forcibly made a part of the Chaldean Empire. Many Jewish people were exiled to the capital of the Chaldean Empire—Babylon, where they would remain for 70 years until King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to Judea and Jerusalem. Upon their return, the Jews began to rebuild their land, Jerusalem and their Temple. The Biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe this time of rebuilding.

In 70 AD the city of Jerusalem was again besieged and eventually destroyed after its walls were breached. The Second Temple was destroyed, this time by Roman forces. This destruction was Rome's response to the Jewish revolt against Rome which began in 66 AD when the Judean Free Government was formed to make Judea a free independent state by throwing off Roman rule. Roman forces fought Jewish rebel forces first in Galilee, before moving South to besiege Jerusalem. The Roman forces then besieged Jerusalem and successfully destroyed it and the Second Temple in 70 AD. The Jewish historian Josephus records that **1.1 Million** non-combatants were killed, and 97,000 Jews made into slaves. The only part of the Second Temple not destroyed was the Western Wall. Known today as the Wailing Wall, it is a place of pilgrimage and prayer to this very day.

It may be difficult for us today to appreciate the overwhelming loss the Jews experienced when their Temple was destroyed. The Temple was more than a place of worship and sacrifice. It was a tangible expression of their very identity as a people. The Temple was a reminder that they were a covenanted people of God's own choosing. The loss of the Temple was tantamount to the loss of God

and of their identity as a people. Although the world did not end with the destruction of the Temple, it did seem to end at least for the Jews. In time, however, they would re-establish their identity as a people. While the Jewish people would remain homeless without a Temple, and without a country they could call their own until 1948, they retained their identity through their religion and their synagogues. But the Age of the Temple was over.

Forty years before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, Jesus predicted its destruction. His disciples were shocked and asked what would be the signs that preceded this event. Jesus responds with the “Mount Olivet discourse” which is found in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). This discourse addresses the coming destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple as part of an end-times narrative. The “Mount Olivet discourse” includes descriptions of future wars and of frightening end-time events such as the darkening of the sun and the moon, and of stars falling from the sky.

Today’s Gospel Reading begins in the middle of this discourse, as found in the Gospel of Mark. Msgr. Charles Pope, a writer and priest of the Archdiocese of Washington, DC, warns us not to interpret this passage too literally because “Jesus is using prophetic language, a prophetic way of speaking, that is meaningful, but not understood in a scientifically literalistic way. Stars cannot actually fall from the sky”.

Jesus is using prophetic imagery. The falling of stars, the darkening of the sun and moon are ways of saying that the things we anchor our hopes and security on—home, wealth and possessions—will become lost to us. They will cease to be our sure foundation and security.

The Jews who had survived the destruction of the Second Temple came to realize that the world that they had known had come to an end. The Temple, with its sacrificial offerings and rituals had ended, to be replaced by rabbis and a synagogue system.

So what conclusions can we draw from all this?

First, we must appreciate that our world is passing away. That includes what we consider to be the most powerful, the most impressive and the most popular.

Again Msgr. Charles Pope had the following to say about the transitory nature of life:

*Some years ago I was looking through a museum, and there was a picture of a family, from about the 1880s. At the bottom of the photo, was this inscription, "My family, as it appeared for a brief time last summer." A poignant caption. I thought of all the people in that photo, and concluded, that every one of them was now dead. I also knew, that the house at which the photo was taken, on the front porch, had long since been destroyed, replaced by an expanding city district of buildings. All is passing, nothing remains here for long.*

*Painful though this is, this is an important, and healing perspective. The truth, that all things are passing, like every truth, sets us free. Internalizing within our self the truth that, as for man, his days, or the flower of the field are like the grass. The wind blows, and he is gone, and his place never sees him anymore (Psalm 130:15-16), painful as it is, it brings a kind of strange serenity. Wherein this truth we are reminded not to set down too many roots here. And neither are we resentful, when this world, passes away.*

The transitory nature of our world—including our career, our savings and possessions—strongly reminds us to place our priorities in what is eternal; God and his eternal kingdom. Much of our time and energy is spent on things that are slipping away, like sand through one's fingers. A lot of effort is spent on one's career, on building a fortune, and little time is spent on expanding one's spiritual life. Parents spend more time worrying about where their child will attend college, than where they will spend eternity. We obsess over passing things like our physical health but neglect enduring things like our spiritual health. We should care for our bodies, but even more should we care for our souls. If we would spend as much effort looking for a place and time to pray as for a restaurant and time to eat, we would be in top spiritual condition.

Today the Lord stands before the Temple building, impressive, a symbol of power, of worldly glories. But impressed though the Apostles are, the Lord is not impressed with passing things. He counsels us to get our priorities straight, and the focus on things which last, things related to his Word which never passes away, and to things like our ultimate destiny, where we shall spend eternity.