

THE GIFT INSIDE THE PACKAGE
Sermon for Pentecost 24B: Mk 13:1-8
LPC, 11/15/09

Most of you know that I recently returned from a vacation to Paris, during which I toured Notre Dame Cathedral. Although that experience was disappointing for reasons I won't go into now, I was reminded of Notre Dame in reading about the Jerusalem Temple in today's Gospel reading. The Temple and Notre Dame actually have much in common.

Both the Temple and Notre Dame were built and perfected over generations. Both represented the sacrificial devotion of their builders and contributors. The magnificence of both wowed the faithful and the unbeliever alike. Like Notre Dame, the Temple was gorgeous. So many of the Temple's surfaces were coated with gold that it shone like the sun itself. The Roman conquerors, no strangers to architectural magnificence, were impressed by it.

The Temple, however, was even more significant to first century Jews than Notre Dame was to Medieval Christians. Christianity was served by many significant shrines and pilgrimage destinations. But in the first century, the Temple was the center and focus of devotion for all Jews throughout the world. Jews, no matter where they lived, tried to celebrate Passover at the Temple in Jerusalem. If distance prevented this, Jews still dreamed and hoped to celebrate Passover at the Temple one day.

Jesus' disciples were among the throngs who were awed by the Temple's splendor. Coming out of the Temple, they exclaim at its sheer size. And Jesus, as Jesus so often does, says something unexpected. Jesus says, "All this is coming down, you know."

What if, this morning, I were to say something similar about this building? Some of you built this edifice. All of you have contributed to its furnishing or maintenance. It is a beautiful thing – a worthy dwelling-place for God. What if I were to remark that it's all coming down? What a horrible thought! On an existential level we do realize that, as a human creation, Lawrencefield cannot last indefinitely, but still the idea of this building's destruction is incredibly painful.

The shock and outrage conjured in us by contemplating the demise of this building is easily matched by the shock and outrage felt by Jesus' hearers when he predicts the destruction of the Temple. But when Jesus talks about the destruction of the Temple, he is communicating on at least three levels.

The first level has to do with prophecy, and physical human history. Mark, the author who brings us this story, is writing many years after Jesus lived. At this point in time he has experienced something that Jesus' firsthand hearers could not have imagined.

In 70 CE, a generation after Jesus, the Roman Empire reacted decisively to quell a Jewish uprising in Palestine. To demoralize the Jews, the Romans destroyed the beautiful Temple at Jerusalem, carting off its exquisite furnishings.

When Mark was writing, people would have remembered these words of Jesus: “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” In light of the Temple’s destruction, these words would have been remembered as literally prophetic. Jesus’ proven gift of prophecy would have bolstered his claim to be God’s son.

The second level of meaning applies to a broader audience than that of Mark’s generation. Part of Jesus’ message is, “Do not confuse the gift with the packaging.” The Temple is a worthy dwelling place for God, but it is not God. The container is just that. The container will pass away. God alone endures.

There is a third layer of meaning that has to do with the nature of the gift inside the package. At this level, the Temple is the symbol of the old order: the so-called “former things” that Jesus says will be passing away. Hidden in Jesus’ prediction of the Temple’s destruction is a great and dramatic promise.

There is a brighter, better, more perfect gift awaiting than the Temple, than Notre Dame, than even Lawrencefield. When Jesus implies that we are not to confuse the gift with the wrapping he does not neglect the gift. The gift is almost too wonderful for the human mind to accept. The gift is so incredible that it’s no wonder people get fixated on the packaging. Yet the true gift remains.

At this point of Mark’s story, Jesus knows that he will be put to death. But we know that’s not the end. Jesus rises. Jesus overcomes death. God, and love, overpower even death. Death is dead! The worst that human beings can fear has been destroyed. Death has no power over us. Jesus has won. Whatever we fear, whatever holds us captive, whatever prevents us from our fullest life will die. And we will live, through the power of Christ.

Many of you know that I’ve come from visiting my mother this past week. My mother has had to give up on several temples that were sacred to her: my father’s physical presence, her own health, and now, it looks like, the ability to maintain her own property, her own space. The crumbling of these beautiful temples is hard to bear. Yet God’s promise remains. If physical health comes to an end, so will, some day, sorrow and suffering. God’s love will prevail. Life will prevail. How hard it is now! Yet hope abides.

When the things we most rely on give out on us, we can remember the permanence of God’s promise. God lives, and so we live, and will continue to live, in God. These are large stones indeed, and they will never be thrown down.