

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel begins with a word picture of the Great Temple in Jerusalem, where Jesus was visiting with his disciples, when one of them remarked, in near child-like fashion, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (Mark 13:1).

There were ancient and respected shrines and altars at Bethel, at Gilgal, and at Shechem – but none of these ancient religious sites could even come close to matching the glory and beauty of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

That Jerusalem Temple was absolutely unparalleled in being revered for its sacredness and holiness – this was the very dwelling place of God!

We should recall how gigantic and impressive it was, the temple complex, with huge stone buildings, set in an immense square courtyard, surrounded by high, thick walls, and located on the very summit of Mount Zion!

Nothing in the nation of Israel in the landscape of Jesus' day could match the Temple for splendor, for strength, for its sense of permanence. "Look, Teacher ...!" The rural Galileans, the little village country folk who were Jesus' disciples, many of them poor fishermen, had to be impressed and even awed by the sight of this magnificent building, this stunning house of God!

Hold this story line in your head for a moment, and consider now another story line less apparent, but just as real and true: this striking and majestic Temple with its vast resources was also the enemy!

Its power, through its leaders, would soon be instrumental in killing the Messiah and many of his followers. And this Temple would continue to be the stronghold of resistance to the church, to all those who would follow the way of Jesus.

Who then could fight against such massive power, such age-long prestige, and such holiness as displayed by the Temple? A humble peasant prophet could. A peasant prophet whose power lay in his trust in the Father God, and in meekness and service chose to fight against it – and his name was Jesus.

"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (Mark 13:2). How does he dare to even hint at such a thing?! This prophetic announcement would soon play an important role in Jesus' trial, condemnation, and sentence of death.

In the next chapter of Mark's Gospel we read: "Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, 'We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'"" (Mark 14:57, 58).

And, later, “All of [the temple leaders] condemned him, as deserving death” (Mark 14:64b).

The destruction of the temple foretold – “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign ...?” (Mark 13:4). Surely the end of the temple will be among the last things, the beginning of the end of time! “What will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” (Mark 13:4b).

*Wars and rumors of wars ... nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom ... earthquakes and famines.*

On Sunday mornings, since I’m in church, I record NBC’s “Meet the Press with Chuck Todd,” and nearly always I watch it later on Sunday evening. I did that last Sunday, and one of the guests was Senator Diane Feinstein, Vice-Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

She talked about the threat of ISIL and the downing of that Russian airplane in Egypt on Saturday, October 31st, killing all 224 people on board, including 25 children. Diane Feinstein said that there’s a “strong probability” that the plane was downed by a terrorist bomb.

But her words about the terrorist group ISIL were even more ominous and threatening. She said that ISIL, as you likely know, is prone to carrying out “attack after attack” and they now have an active presence in twelve countries – in 12 countries!

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On Thursday, National Public Radio carried a report of twin suicide bombers setting off explosions on a busy street in southern Beirut, Lebanon. The Lebanese Red Cross initially reported 37 deaths from this coordinated attack, with injuries being sustained by more than 180 other people.

The death toll has since been updated to 43. Though this attack occurred in an area under the control of the Shiite group, Hezbollah, the Islamic State purportedly claimed responsibility.

NPR’s Alice Fordham reported, “About 18 months ago, there was a spate of bombings in the area, largely claimed by Sunni Muslim groups linked with Syrian rebels.”

She continued, “In Syria – which is next door to Lebanon – Hezbollah has taken the side of the regime against the rebel forces.” And then she added, “The death toll from this attack is higher than any other attacks in Lebanon in recent memory.”

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The “USA Today” section of Friday’s “Indianapolis Star” reported on Kurdish fighters, backed by American airstrikes and advisors, who were able to sever an Islamic State supply line between Iraq and Syria on Thursday.

A related article in that same section of the paper told of the discovery of multiple mass graves in northern Iraq. Human Rights Watch estimates that Islamic State militants have killed 3,000 to 5,000 people, herding them together in large groups and shooting them, or beheading them.

Some of the deceased in mass graves were soldiers who fought against the Islamic State; some were Yazidi people, a religious minority in Iraq. The Islamic State calls the Yazidis “devil worshipers” because they are not followers of Islam.

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Please forgive me if you found these news reports for just three days this past week to be somewhat repetitive, and chillingly and violently similar, but that’s just the point!

And I didn’t even mention any earthquakes or famines or, until now, the scores of people injured and killed in multiple attacks in Paris, France, on Friday night – and that’s also just the point.

Jesus’ reply in today’s Gospel is not to give a specific warning, or a “special” sign of the nearness of the end, but rather to say that we should be in a constant state of readiness for its arrival at any moment.

Are we going to focus on the horror and terror of sinful people and this fallen world, or are we as Christians going to focus on the redemptive power of Jesus Christ?

Whenever bad things happen, and in close proximity to each other, someone will always say it’s a sign of the nearness of the end – but not Jesus. What Jesus says here is, bad things happen all the time, and often in rapid succession: “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs” (Mark 13:8).

We don’t know whether the end is near, or a long way off – but it really doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you can trust Jesus to see you through the future, whatever it may bring. Keep the faith: trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and God will take care of the rest! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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