

Two men went up to pray

Sermon for Proper 33

*Readings: Is. 65.17-25; Is 12.2-6; 2 Thess. 3.6-13; and Lk 21.5-19*

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Two men went up to pray. One was dressed in fine clothes, at peace, and calm. After war, prosperity and well-being had returned to the land. The other was dressed in the bloody rags of a martyr. In the midst of war, he had become a target of the anger and persecution of his people because he called on the name of Jesus.

Each man looked at the other, wondering what he was doing in that place. Then they heard the Scripture being read: For all things there is a season: a time to be glad and a time to weep....

And both called on God, and God smiled on both, and both returned to their houses justified and in peace.

Today, I want to say a brief word to 2 groups of people.

First, a word to this congregation here present:

We have so much to be thankful for. This past week I was at the Remembrance Day ceremonies at the University of Ottawa and on Parliament Hill. I heard the prayers, cannons, jets, the music sung. After the horrors of war and the willingness of so many to risk their lives, we have been given such rich years.

This parish community is a testimony to the peace and well-being that have come to us at such a cost. After the dark days of war, we have been blessed.

To us, as much as to the people of Israel, the words of Is 65 apply: after the horror of war and the destruction of war and the weeping, the people will return to their own land. There will now be rejoicing, instead of weeping. Temples will be rebuilt and God will again bless the land.

So, my friends, I say to you: let us rejoice this day for what God has done to restore to us`our rejoicing.

Second, I want to say a word to those who are not here and who cannot hear me. Today, together with thousands of Christians like us who are rejoicing in our blessings, I want to say a word to the millions of Christians -- children, women, and men -- around the world, who are living the horrors of destruction and suffering. I am not thinking first of all of those who are suffering because of injustices that they have done; I am thinking of you who are suffering

because of who you are. You are those who call yourselves after our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And you are all over the globe: Burundi (for which we pray today specifically) and Rwanda, Burma, Arab countries, such as Iraq, Turkey, and Afghanistan, other Islamic countries, such as Iran, China, India, Turkey.

To you who cannot hear me -- I want to say 2 things drawn from our Gospel for today:

First, I want to tell you: "What you are experiencing is not an accident or a misalignment of the stars or the result of geo-political conflict, though it may be any one of these things in part; what you are experiencing is God's shaking of the foundations: God is bring down that which has begun to say that it is God and God is reclaiming what is rightfully his!"

Every power in the world is instituted by God for some purpose. This is true not only of all those governments we view as righteous, from the time of King David to the time of Queen Elizabeth the Second, but it is also true of those governments that we would consider to have been evil governments: the government of the Pharaohs of Egypt and Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, of the Caesars and their Pontius Pilates, of the Hitlers, Stalins and Maos; yes, even of the Idi Amins and Mobutu Sese Sekos. In each case, whether they were considered by us to be just or unjust, the power that is given to them is by God, but it goes to their head and they begin to think that it is theirs by some natural right. They begin to act like gods and in the end, some of them even claim to be gods!

It is then that God shakes the foundations and brings them down. In some cases this happens sooner, in some cases, later, but it always happens. Nor is it easy or or without pain. There is destruction, as the forces of evil are unleashed to try to hold on to power.

It has always been this way, and it always will be till our Lord reigns supreme. All those governments, even godly governments centered around Temples, were instituted and blessed by God, but they began to play God and were destroyed. In most cases, it was a horrifying process, dragging as many innocent as guilty victims in the wake, for even surgical bombing strikes are never completely surgical!

So, to you who cannot hear me, remember: God is not mocked and God does not sleep: he will act at the right time to tear down stone by stone those powers that pretend that hey are god.

Second, I want to tell you who are not here and cannot hear me: "In the midst of that shaking of the foundations, know that the followers of God will be persecuted."

Why should this be? What do innocent followers of the Father of our Lord have to do with all of this?

There will always be various arguments given why the followers of God should be persecuted. In the Roman Empire, it was: "They have abandoned the worship of our traditional gods and look what is happening to us." In the French Revolution, it was: "They have allied themselves

with the powers of wealth, and the people are not being cared for." In China today, it is: "They have allied themselves foreigners and are introducing foreign culture into our land."

But the real reason why the followers of our God are persecuted when the foundations are shaken is given to us by Jesus in our reading today: They are persecuted simply because of who they are and the name they call on: Jesus. Why? Because the followers of Jesus bear witness that true power lies beyond this world and that the only power that there is in this world is given from beyond, and the powers of this world cannot bear to hear that their power is limited and so are they!

Jesus indicates that his followers should be prepared for many things. And he tells you these things today. Be prepared to suffer for your faith; beware those who, when the foundations are shaking, go around talking about "peace in our time"; be prepared to die before you reach old age (Luke 21.18: not a hair falls from your head, means few of you will reach old age, when hairs do fall from one's head). Nevertheless, also be firm in the midst of it all: continue to hold on to Jesus and continue to witness to the world that Jesus alone is the source of power, a power that lies in a Jerusalem far beyond the corrupting powers of this world. For Jesus alone will never fail you. Those around will fail you, even family and friends, but "Jesus has never failed me yet" and he never will you either!

Two men went up to pray. To both the message is the same: Rejoice and be thankful for the many rich blessings that are ours when God extends His hand of blessing; never fail to give thanks for the many good things that God has brought our way: for we are truly blessed. But also remember those brothers and sisters, who were once rich, and blessed, and rejoiced, but who are now persecuted as their world crumbles around them. Pray that they may stand firm in their witness. And finally pray that when our foundations are shaken -- for they will be, even here! -- pray that we stand firm and witness to the only God and Father of our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom, with the Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory, both now and forever. Amen.