

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

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One of the first things we need to recall about today's lesson is that when Jesus in Luke's Gospel foretells the destruction of the Second Temple, it had already occurred by the time he wrote this passage --- perhaps as long before as 30 years. So, what is reported is not so much a prediction as the *recollection* of a truly momentous event, or an *interpretation* of history.

The Second Temple was built by King Herod the Great who spent many decades constructing it (possibly as long as 46 years) and, in the end, produced a building so magnificent and so enormous that its beauty and grandeur had to be directly observed to be believable.

It was one of the marvels of the ancient world, and it was central to the religious life of the Jewish people, so that its destruction was traumatic. It was known as the Second Temple because it replaced Solomon's Temple destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Once completed, it lasted from 516 BC to 70 A.D. All that remains of it today is the Western Wall or Wailing Wall, one of the principal sights greeting tourists to Israel.

It was built on what we know as the Temple Mount, part of Mt. Moriah. Though never finished, the intent was to build a temple complex 1600 ft. wide by 900 ft. broad with walls up to 16 ft. deep. Some of the building materials included huge stones weighing 100 tons each. That will give you an idea of the immensity of the project.

The Roman-Jewish War lasted from 66-70 A.D. In the beginning, the rebellion was widespread, but military pressure forced the Jews back into their "fortress Jerusalem" by 69 A.D. Animosity was so intense on both sides that the Roman victors enacted terrible revenge and utterly destroyed the city and Temple. The event and the memory of it have been transformative for the Jewish people. It was at this time that the Sadducee party disappeared and the great Diaspora occurred --- the dispersal of the Jews to every part of the known world of the Mediterranean, and the abandonment of the homeland. It ended animal sacrifice as a central part of worship, and the Temple itself was replaced in Jewish life by many individual synagogues, and rabbis emerged to replace Temple priests.

Prior to the Roman-Jewish War, relations between Christians and Jews had been largely positive. After the events which led to the destruction of 70 A.D., Christians tended to blame Jews, and Jews blamed Christians. So, for Luke, writing around 85 A.D., there was a sense of rising turmoil. This does not mean that anti-Semitism as we know it developed fully at that time, but it does mean that the seeds of that later hateful tradition came into being with these terrible events.

You will recall that before the destruction of Jerusalem and its magnificent Temple in 70 A.D., Jesus had overturned the tables of the money-changers and had driven them out of their places of business within the building. It was a shocking event, and everyone expected that it would bring ruinous consequences for God's people. Thus, what happened in 70 A.D. could well have been predicted and found plausible by anyone alive at the time of Jesus' provocative action.

This passage comes from a section of Luke's gospel which we can consider an example of apocalyptic literature. That's a big word, and it isn't the kind of thing we are used to reading in our day, but we can define it by pointing to its normal features. Apocalyptic literature acknowledges that the present time is one of suffering. This is happening because evil powers are afflicting God's people. What the future holds for those living through such times is a great reversal of fortunes. That is, the faithful righteous who suffer now will be rewarded later. Those who bring suffering to others will themselves suffer. And the purpose of all of this is that it served to encourage people to continue being faithful and patient during a period of sustained suffering.

The unsettling language and imagery we find in apocalyptic literature is a means of assuring the faithful that they should keep their trust in God even when facing extremely trying circumstances. In fact, the real object here is to provide assurance of God's continuing faithfulness even in the bleakest of times.

It is a strange kind of literature for those of us who live in the developed Western world, because we don't live in a time and place in which people are regularly experiencing extreme deprivation or are witnessing traumatic events, the kind that affect large segments of the population on an ongoing basis. So, this kind of literature tended to be produced in the context of actual events which triggered this kind of thinking, and those events occurred, for the most part, in the distant past.

Jesus tells his followers that he fully expects that they will be persecuted, but he regards that persecution as an opportunity to testify to their faith. Ultimately, their experience of persecution will not end in death but in a victory for their souls. They are asked to trust in God throughout even the darkest of times, knowing that God will vindicate them in the end just as he vindicated Jesus.

The passage also warns us about becoming too fixated on temporary human institutions. The passage suggests that human achievement tends to be temporary, fleeting, impermanent. And, knowing Luke's interests, there is likely in this message a bias in favor of helping the poor rather than dwelling on one's own losses. Although passages of this kind contain images of destruction, they are ultimately grounded in hope --- the hope that God remains present in our world even in the worst of times.

Even in a world-destroying catastrophe, Luke's Jesus says that God's faithful people should lift their heads and expect resurrection, redemption and rescue. But Luke's recalling of the horrors of the end of the Jewish War with Rome were also a reminder that in this world, we can expect wars and insurrections ---- they are as much a part of life as are happier occasions. They are not some special sign of the end of time. The followers of Jesus are urged here to ignore the various false prophets who will come along and try to mislead them.

This perspective was also well-aligned with Luke's view of the political powers in play by the end of the first century. Rome had decisively won the war. It had utterly defeated the Jews and rendered them politically weak and divided.

For Luke and his followers, many of whom were Gentile, it made sense to be at peace with Rome even if Roman values conflicted with Christian ones. Luke would have been addressing the entire civilized world of the time, so his narrative serves an apologetic function which would have been protective of the emerging Christian movement. Thus, Luke's purposes can be linked to the reality of the world he and his community were living in. "He edits the apocalyptic prophecies concerning Jerusalem and the end time so that the delay of the *Parousia* (or the Second Coming) has a purpose: 'until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.'"

It was, after all, a Gentile world that Luke and his audience occupied. The text we are reading this morning "has nothing to do with predictions of the future, and any interpretation which treats it so is fatally flawed from the start."

Luke's account was not written for 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans but "a beleaguered and persecuted minority under the thumb of Rome." How were they supposed to deal with their situation? Luke says they are to "listen for Jesus, trust in Jesus, and use Jesus himself as the model to follow."

The real point of my commentary is to provide context for our reading of scripture so that we do not misinterpret it but rather find its true meaning as revealed by those who are steeped in the study of the New Testament. Our faith as Anglicans grows out of three strands: scripture, tradition and reason. If we leave reason out of the equation, we risk losing the entire meaning.

Thus, today's collect could not be more appropriate: **Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.**

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