

A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity Sunday, July 27, 2008

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“When he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace!” (from the Gospel, Luke 19:41f.).

“Peace” refers to a state of harmony between God and man, with the result that there is health and wholeness within each person and an absence of external conflict between people. Peace is the intended result of the covenant God made with Israel. When the covenant sacrifice is offered to atone for sin and reconcile God and man, and when the people live by the Torah, the result is peace—between God and man, within each person and between people.

Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem. He wept in the way a near eastern man weeps, which means it was a very loud and noticeable—a very un Anglican display! Jesus was lamenting that the people did not understand the things that would bring God’s promised covenant peace. The people wanted peace, but they pursued it in their own way, not according to God’s plan, and that led to disaster.

The disaster to which Jesus refers, in which not one stone was left upon another, is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus in A.D. 70. Tens of thousands of the inhabitants of Jerusalem were slaughtered and the temple was destroyed. You may recall the story of Masada, a desert plateau where some who escaped from Jerusalem committed mass suicide rather than surrender to the pursuing Romans.

Jesus wept because this could have been avoided. Jesus called Israel to repent and accept him as God’s Messiah. To repent meant that they had to give up their own plans for independence from Rome and their own ideas of what it meant to keep the Torah. They had to begin to follow Jesus. They had to adopt his plan for peace and accept him as the fulfillment of the Torah.

In rejecting Jesus, the leaders of Jerusalem chose to pursue the goal of independence from Rome on their own terms. Eventually, the more militant factions in Israel won the day. They led a revolt against the Roman forces that actually succeeded in liberating Jerusalem and other cities in Israel from Roman control. The brutal invasion by Titus was Rome’s crushing response. As a consequence, there was no Israel on a world map from the year 70 until 1948.

The setting for today’s gospel is Palm Sunday, just after the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. St. Luke, alone, tells us that Jesus paused and wept after the Palm Sunday procession, knowing that the shouts of praise would soon give way to rejection.

God’s coming to Jerusalem is a biblical theme. There was a great procession and celebration when King David first brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. There was a great celebration when David’s son, Solomon, rode into Jerusalem on a donkey after he had been anointed as king.

There are also poignant images of God leaving the city. One of the saddest Old Testament events is described in the first ten chapters of Ezekiel. The prophet describes how the presence of God left the temple because of Jerusalem’s sin. The glory of God never returned to the temple until Jesus came.

Jerusalem's rejection of Jesus is highlighted by the fact that Jesus was taken out of the city to be crucified.

The coming of God to Jerusalem remains a central theme of the church. The church is the New Jerusalem. Jesus came to the New Jerusalem on Pentecost through the gift of the Spirit. Jesus will return to Jerusalem in a final way when he "comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead."

Jesus comes to us now, in interim ways. The most objective way he comes to the whole church is in the Eucharist. We herald his coming with the words, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord"--the same words from Psalm 118 that the Palm Sunday crowd used.

As Jesus comes to us, and we gather to receive him, we find a point of connection with the gospel. Do we know the things that make for peace? Jerusalem stands as a warning for us, for sometimes we substitute our own agenda and plan for God's will. Sometimes we pursue peace in various external ways, while ignoring our internal distance from God. Sometimes we have our own Rome that we want God to defeat for us, while we neglect the rebellion that is still present in our own hearts.

The challenge of the spiritual life is to continually remember that peace begins with our own reconciliation with God. We cannot have external peace until we have internal peace. The liturgy teaches us this. The liturgy ends with a blessing of peace because peace is the result of the covenant that is fulfilled in our Eucharistic remembrance. The liturgy is a sort of road map to peace, for it teaches us that we must hear God's word, repent and be reconciled to God through the cross before we can get to peace.

Peace extends outward from the altar. Jesus gives us each spiritual gifts to use to work for peace. As our epistle says, "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all." When we are reconciled to God, the Holy Spirit unites us with every other member of the body and leads us to use our gifts in ways to benefit others and promote peace.

The Eucharistic coming of Jesus to New Jerusalem hearkens back to the Day of Pentecost and contrasts with his coming to earthly Jerusalem. Earthly Jerusalem rejected Jesus and suffered judgment, but New Jerusalem receives Jesus by faith and becomes the new temple. God now lives in us through the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus comes to us and we come to him, let us pray that the Holy Spirit may open our eyes to know the things that make for peace.