

November 17, 2019

Pentecost 23

Luke 21:5-19

“It Ain’t Easy”

“You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish.”

My first day at university was both memorable and terrifying. The first year class was ushered into the largest lecture hall on campus for speeches by two persons: the president of the school and the dean of students. Dr. Pettit spoke first; he was a very warm, grandfather-like presence who congratulated us for joining a long tradition of Ursinus students, and spoke of the legacy that many alumni have left for both the school and in their chosen professions. Then it was Dean Bozarth’s turn to speak, and even before he said a word you could feel the tension rising in the room. I’ve often thought of Dean Bozarth as the model for Darth Vader in Star Wars; he was a large man with a deep voice and a foreboding presence. His speech to the entering class had none of the warmth or grace of the president; instead, he began by instructing us to look to our right and to our left, because “at the end of this year one of the three of you will no longer be on this campus.” He went on to warn us about how difficult the curriculum would be for us, how we would be challenged as we had never been before, and how even the best students in their high school classes have flunked out after the first year. His final words summed up the message of his speech: “It ain’t easy here at Ursinus.”

If it had been Dean Bozarth’s intention to strike terror in the hearts of our class, he succeeded; I can still remember how frightened I was when I left that lecture hall, and how I went straight back to my room and began reading the assignments for our first week of classes. But I would soon discover that Dean Bozarth was actually doing us a favor, because the curriculum was very demanding, and I worked harder in that first year than I ever had in all of my years of schooling. Many of my classmates did not make it through the first year, either flunking out or transferring to another university. My four years at Ursinus were very demanding, but they prepared me well for both seminary and for ordained

ministry – neither of which have been easy. All these years later, his warning keeps echoing in my ears: *“It ain’t easy.”*

While Jesus never uses this exact phrase (and I am well aware that it is not grammatically correct!) he does warn those who would be his followers that the life of a disciple of Christ will not be easy. From the beginning, Jesus makes it clear to anyone who would follow him that there is a cost to discipleship:

“As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” – Matthew 4:18-20.

“To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’” – Luke 9:59-60.

“When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich.” – Luke 18:22-23.

Jesus’ warnings about the costly nature of discipleship are heard again in today’s Gospel lesson, when after having followed him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday some of the people who were with him *“were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God”* (21:5). Their first impressions of the Temple were confirmed by the historian Josephus, whose is even more lavish in his descriptions of the beauty of the Temple:

“The sacred edifice itself, the holy temple, in the central position, was approached by a flight of twelve steps. The façade was of equal height and breadth, each being a hundred cubits; but the building behind was narrower by forty cubits, for in front it had as it were shoulders extending twenty cubits on either side. The first gate was seventy cubits high and twenty-five broad and had no doors, displaying unexcluded the void expanse of heaven; the entire face was covered with gold, and through it the first edifice was visible to the spectator without in all

the grandeur and the surroundings of the inner gate all gleaming with gold fell beneath his eye.”

But Jesus is not as impressed as the others with the grandeur and majesty of the Temple; instead, he quickly reminds them that *“as for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down”* (21:6), echoing the words of his lament over Jerusalem that *“they will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”* (19:44).

The crowds who hear Jesus’ warning are startled and alarmed – but they don’t seem surprised. Jesus’ hearers are well acquainted with calamity and crisis; they can readily imagine a sudden disaster, even the destruction of the Temple. *“So they don’t waste their time wringing their hands or wondering why or how such devastation might come. They just want to know when it will be coming. What are the signs?”* (Yvette Schock). While Jesus said nothing about a “sign” of the approach of the Temple’s destruction, his audience assumes that there must be one. The Old Testament prophets had identified signs that would signal that the destruction or deliverance of Jerusalem was imminent:

“And this shall be the sign for you: this year you shall eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that; then in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. The surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downwards, and bear fruit upwards; for from Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, and from Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.” – 2 Kings 19:29-31

“Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and will bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” – Isaiah 7:14.

Josephus reports that preceding the destruction of the Temple there were various signs of its destruction, but they chose to trust in the false prophets who reassured the people: *“Thus it was that the wretched people were deluded at that time by charlatans and pretended messengers of the deity; while they neither*

*heeded nor believed in the manifest portents that foretold the coming destruction..."*

Rather than describe the signs that would precede and confirm the destruction he foresaw, Jesus issues a series of three warnings. The first warning is for his audience to *"beware that you are not led astray,"* which encompasses being led to sin, being taught false teachings, and being deceived regarding apocalyptic events, a warning that Paul would echo in his writings (*"Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived!"* – 1 Corinthians 6:9). In the New Testament, deception is often characterized as the work of false prophets (*"False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, and lead astray, if possible, the elect."* – Mark 13:22). The false prophets' declaration that *"I am he!"* is deceptively similar to Jesus' self-identification in his *"I am"* statements in John's Gospel (*"I am the way, and the truth, and the life."* – John 14:6). The fact that *"many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!'"* (21:8) confirms the necessity of Jesus' warning, which came to pass when *"Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared."* (Acts 5:36).

Jesus' second warning concerns wars and uprisings, which were often mentioned as signs of apocalyptic events (*"The end is near!"*); but Jesus instructs his followers not to be terrified by these events, for *"these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."* (21:9). The allusion to *"dreadful portents and great signs from heaven"* prepares the reader for the detailed description of these events at the time of the coming of the Son of Man:

- *"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming in the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise you hears, because your redemption is drawing near."* – 21:25-28.