

Proper 28B – “As for these things which you see, the days will come when there shall not be left one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Mk. 13.3

In Sunday school little Cindy wrote a letter to God. It went something like this, “Dear Mr. God, I have read your book, the Bible. While it has a lot of stories that I like, I still have some questions. What does the word “begat” mean? No one here will tell me. Love, Cindy.”

St. Andrew’s is an Anglican parish. This is supposed to describe the way that we relate to one another and the broader Christian heritage of which we are a part. But I often wonder what we mean by that when we use that word “Anglican”. I think some folks believe it has something to do with the Prayer Book or maybe the Archbishop of Canterbury. Others might say that it relates to the fact that we wear vestments and have a more formal worship style than other Christian traditions. While these may be common, interesting assumptions, Anglicanism refers to a historic movement with a specific attitude toward Holy Scripture. This attitude was codified in the Sixth Article of Religion which begins, “Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be

proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” This attitude was formulated by the reformers of the 16th century like Luther, Calvin, and our own Thomas Cranmer. It is the Good News of God’s word that is authoritative in every part of our lives. It is God’s gracious self-disclosure that precedes all our hopes for life with him.

But like little Cindy, there are parts of the Scriptures that intrigue us, and there are parts that bore us, puzzle us, and even horrify us. How many of us enjoy reading the sacrificial specifications of Leviticus or the national census of Numbers? But to say that there are parts of Scripture that do not come easily to hand and heart does not make us unique. John Calvin, one of the most prolific exponents of Scripture, wrote commentaries upon every book of the Bible except one: The Revelation to St. John. Likewise Luther called the Epistle of James “an epistle of straw”. So it is so often the case that while we ascribe authority to the whole of scripture, we have our favorite books, a canon within the canon, that we find ourselves returning to again and again.

But certainly the Gospels must be universally accepted for their clarity and pertinence to the scholar and student alike? The life of Jesus, his birth, his healings and miracles, his death and passion, his resurrection and ascension recorded by the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the bedrock of the Christian faith. What dispute can there be here? None more disputed than our gospel lesson from Mark and the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. For centuries men and women have read this passage of Mark's gospel to mean that Jesus was predicting his eminent return to earth, his Second Coming. He would come back to earth before the disciples' generation had died. The trumpets would sound, the angels would sing, and the Earth would dissolve in an explosion of fire and smoke. I believe that you may be familiar with this interpretation of the passage. And I do not say that this is an unlearned, unscholarly opinion. Many scholars to this day are convinced that Jesus expected and taught that he would return within a generation to bring in the End of the World. But there was a problem: the world hasn't ended, and Jesus hasn't come back. Therefore, many conclude that Jesus was simply mistaken, and so were the evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke for including these predictions in their Gospel accounts. Likewise, the great 20c English philosopher, Bertrand Russell, pointed to this passage,

and its incompleteness as one of the primary reasons that he rejected Christianity.

So, we are in a bit of a pinch. Either Matthew, Mark and Luke were wrong for attributing these sayings to Jesus, and their entire testimony is thereby suspect, or Jesus actually believed that he would return, and did not. Which poison shall we pick? I say neither! For poison is for the dead, but we are alive through the truth of God's promises expressed in the truth of his word, and most fully in the truth of the one who cannot lie nor be deceived – Jesus Christ! I answer instead that Matthew, Mark and Luke were correct in recording these sayings falling from the inspired lips of Jesus himself. And Jesus, God of god, light of light, very god of very god, yet conceived as very man in the womb of the Virgin, yet without sin, was not mistaken but spoke truly. How can this be? It can be because it is we who have been mistaken, not the eternal Son. It is we who have taken this passage to refer to Jesus' second coming, and the end of the world. Instead, I suggest that we find Jesus in this passage from Mark exercising his office of prophet against the rebellious city of Jerusalem. He had come to find good fruit, and there was nothing but war and vice. Likewise, he was exercising his office of priest by coming to Jerusalem, the site of countless millions of animal sacrifices, to

offer himself as the one true sacrifice for all time. So he was making the Temple obsolete. And he had come to Jerusalem to exercise his office of king by riding into his capital city in state and establishing his authority upon the throne of the cross. If Jerusalem did not, fall Jesus is neither prophet, priest nor king. He would be a false prophet, an heretical priest, and a powerless potentate. But what conclusion must we come to if Jerusalem was indeed destroyed? That he has been vindicated as true, and has received power to sit at the right hand of the Ancient of Days.

So let us consider our gospel lesson in the light of a brief review of Mark's message up to this point. At his baptism Jesus received the anointing of divine approval, and commissioned as the rightful king. "Thou art my son, with whom I am well pleased." This is not to say that Jesus kingship was undisputed from this moment on. Certainly not. Instead Jesus was like David in his anointing at the hands of Samuel. He had been made king of God's people, but he had still to claim it for himself. And so Jesus was tempted by the Devil in the wilderness, to forfeit his inheritance if he would but worship the demonic prince. But Jesus invoked the powerful word of God three times against the archenemy and assured him that the true king had arrived at last. And so he proceeded upon a ministry proclaiming that he was bringing in

the kingdom of God. The signs of the kingdom were evident: the sick were healed and the message of freedom was proclaimed. The battle that Jesus had joined with Satan in the desert continued even as he healed the blind, the deaf and the lame and driving out the demonic armies of the Satan.

As he approached the city of Jerusalem, the city of his father, King David, Jesus mounted a colt and rode regally into his capitol. All the while the crowds waved branches and lay down their clothes to mark the way for their new king, singing, “Hosanna! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!”

But this was not a day of pure joy, but of judgment as well. For the prophet Malachi wrote of this day, “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” He had finally come, preceded by the messenger John Baptist, and they did not receive John, but killed him. So Jesus, the rightful king, came into the Temple courts and drove out the moneychangers, not to purify it for further use, but instead to give it over for destruction. For he quoted the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in

your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the Lord... Therefore I will do to the house which is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your father, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight.”

With all this held firmly in our minds it should come as no surprise that the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees would each in turn attempt to discern by what authority he did these things. This is not a theological discussion. It is a political one. They were saying, “You are acting like the king. We don’t like that. We want you to give us evidence.” Likewise, the disciples ask Jesus, “Tell us when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?” In our gospel lesson Jesus takes up the language of cosmic destruction so frequently used by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. They had predicted the fall of the great, filthy and rebellious city Babylon with visions of falling stars and darkened skies. Babylon, the city of the star, would fall, and the chosen of Yahweh, must run for the hills. But now it is no longer Babylon that is judged and no longer Israel that shall be saved. Instead, the judgment that once was reserved for pagan Babylon will be poured out upon Jerusalem and the Temple. And the ones that must look for the signs of the times are not Israel, but those who love and follow Jesus. So

Jesus says to them, “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.” In the midst of persecution and war the young Church would be saved. At the sight of the Roman armies approaching Jerusalem, the disciples would know that Jesus had spoken the truth. As the walls of the city crumbled and the Temple fell, the Pharisees and Sadducees would know that Jesus had spoken truly. The Son of Man had come in cloud, with power and great glory to be seated at the right hand of the ancient of days, even as the prophet Daniel had predicted. The Lord is king, be the people never so impatient; he sitteth between the Cherubim, be the earth never so unquiet!

But what difference does it make that Jesus proclaimed divine judgment upon the Temple? Isn’t it nice that he sits as king in Heaven at the right hand of the eternal Father, but what difference does the destruction of the Jewish Temple make 2000 years later in North America?

First, I offer to you the question of salvation. The Temple was the focus of God’s people until its destruction by the Babylonians in 587BC and finally by Rome in 70AD. While it stood it was the center of the world; the place of sacrifice for sin, reconciliation, and sanctification. This was the place for the

healing of disease and the forgiveness of sins. Here was the point at which Heaven and Earth met and God dwelled among his people. Truly, the Temple was a shadow of the person of Jesus Christ, Immanuel: God with us. For St. Paul wrote the Ephesians, “For he is our peace who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.” It is Jesus Christ himself that is the new Temple, and is building up that Temple with living stones, those people who have faith in him. There is no other way to be reconciled to the Father. There is not one way for the Jew in the Temple, and another way for the Gentile in Jesus. No, the Temple has passed away and the only way for peace, joy and righteousness is through the final sacrifice made by Jesus himself.

Second, I offer to you the question of authority. We too easily make the mistake that all this was simply a religious disagreement. Jesus and his disciple were sitting on top of a hill, looking across the valley at a big church house on the top of another hill. The disciples were really impressed at how big it was and how many people were attending and how many sacrifices and offerings were made there. Jesus’ criticism, and even judgment of it,

was in some way criticizing Judaism, and in turn proposing a new religion called Christianity. But this is a great oversimplification, and I would say, a mistake. As I have attempted to show, as we have progressed through Mark's gospel, the Temple was more than a place of worship. It localized the spiritual, the political, and the cosmic hope of all Israel. I say the cosmic hope, because it was the claim of the pious Israelite that the God whose home the Temple was ruled all the world. When he finally sent his agent, the Messiah, he would rule as king over all the nations. In proclaiming judgment, Jesus claimed to be that king over all the earth. In destroying the Temple, God the Father confirmed Jesus' claim. So Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." We, like the disciples, are easily distracted and deeply impressed by the ostentatious display of authority in this world and so quickly forget that it is Jesus that has conquered the world by his death. Whether it be the pomp of the Pope in Rome, or the legal demands of the Episcopal Church in New York City we are easily impressed. Likewise, we are awed by the displays of military might and demands for allegiance made by our own government. We hear that good Christians should support foreign wars and pay our taxes, because God has authorized the government. But we must be careful to remember who it is

that is God and who is king. Most certainly it is not the President of the United States. Where governments and authorities, kings, princes and yes, presidents resist the God of Heaven, they will be thrown down. This is the message of the Temple. Because the Temple was destroyed Jesus Christ has been vindicated and shown to be the one true king, for ages of ages. It is he that has exclusive claim.

Therefore unto the Almighty Father, his most glorious Son, and the Holy Ghost the Comforter, three persons, one God, be ascribed as is most due, all power, glory, might, majesty, and dominion, now, henceforth, and forevermore. AMEN