

Sermon – Nov. 15, 2009

I speak to you in the name of God, the Author of all life, the source of all possibilities, the Creator and Redeemer of all that has been, all that is, and all that is to come. Amen.

As Jesus came out of the Temple in Jerusalem, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus said, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Two years ago I had just returned from my trip to Israel. Even now, the images are still vivid in my memory. I could imagine the multitudes of people who, in Jesus time, made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Standing on the Mount of Olives I could look down in the valley, and see the garden of Gethsemane and then look up toward the west and see the great walls of Jerusalem that Herod built – walls with stones that were twenty feet long and eight feet tall. Not even the Romans could take the time and effort to knock them down.

But they did knock down everything else. It seems that the mixture of spirituality, mysticism and downright stubbornness of the semitic people proved to be more than a challenge for the Roman governors. There were Saducees the entitled ones, there were Pharisees the righteous ones, there were Essenes the monastic ones and there were the Christians, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth – the one who preached peace and love. In 70 AD the Romans could not manage it any more. And so 40 years after Jesus had been crucified, except for the Great wall of Herod, the Romans destroyed the entire city – the huge Antonia Fortress – the

palace of Herod – the amphitheatre – and most importantly the Temple. Every great structure of the city was razed to the ground. For the Jewish people of that day – both those who followed Jesus and those who did not – it felt like the apocalypse - **end of the world.**

“Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Is this what Jesus was talking about?

Maybe. It’s hard to say.

But one thing is for certain. For those who followed Jesus of Nazareth, the one who preached love and forgiveness, they turned **away** from the old Jerusalem which had passed away. They turned toward the hope of a new kind of city; a new Jerusalem that came directly from the love of God. A place where, like Jesus, God dwelt in their midst. This is the hope they turned to. A city that was founded in their hearts rather than on a hill.

Jesus continued... “But nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

The world that we live in today in 2009 does not seem like the new Jerusalem just yet. It is filled with plenty of pain and conflict... Creation has a built in double edged sword... everything that is beautifully created also has the possibility of being destroyed... there is nothing to be done about it but to toil and pray and have faith... as human beings this is something we live with every day... Sometimes there are moments when we become more acutely aware of this – like at funerals – or at the service we had at the cenotaph last Wednesday.

But what was Jesus talking about when he referred to “the birthpangs”?

Wars? Famines? Earthquakes?

What did he mean by birthpangs? What was it that was about to be born?

I look at the headlines every day. I look at the terrible things that people do to each other. I look at the pain of the world. And I say are these birthpangs?

If so then what is being born?

When hearing the news headlines and the strange and pathetic TV programs that call out to us, it’s hard not to scratch your head and wonder if we, like the panda, are an endangered species. And yet, in spite of it all, I refuse to be full of doom and gloom. I refuse to accept the fundamentalist babble that the world is going to hell in a handbag, and I also refuse to accept that the global market has the final say on all matters of human interest.

Truthfully speaking, in spite of all our challenges, I feel amazingly encouraged.

Am I **just being hopeful** when I see that some racial barriers are being razed to the ground? Am I **just being hopeful** when I see those who are most vulnerable receiving clean water and shelter from the elements? Am I **just being hopeful** when, in the face of war and conflict, horrendous diseases like polio are being erased from the face of the earth by sheer stubbornness and willpower? Am I **just being hopeful** when I see our neighbours to the south finally opening up the possibility of medical aid to all regardless of income.

Yes. You bet. Maybe I am just being hopeful. But being hopeful can be contagious. And it can become inspiring.

The values that we have come to cherish in our society – *truth, freedom, love, justice, forgiveness, compassion, mercy, care for the vulnerable* – these values which come from our spiritual tradition are still influencing our society... but they need our ongoing help, our witness, and our encouragement.

No. Maybe the world of 2009 is not the New Jerusalem just yet. But some pretty amazing steps are being made. And more steps will be taken when people are inspired by the witness and message of people like you and I who follow Jesus of Nazareth. For we know that God in our midst breaks down all barriers, builds powerful trust, and makes possible things which seemed impossible.

This is exactly what the apostle John was experiencing and writing down in his wonderful revelation. He was expressing to us the amazing possibilities that open up when we are caught up in the love of God.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home^{} of God is among mortals.*

He will dwell^{} with them; they will be his peoples,^{*}*

and God himself will be with them; ^{} ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’”

The love of God washes over and surrounds all suffering, just as the ocean wave washes over a rock on the shore.

When you know this to be true, then you have become a beautiful gift. You yourself have become a building block of the New Jerusalem come down from heaven.

INFSHS. Amen.