

Sermon, Proper 28B, 2015
October 12, 2014

Did you ever ask somebody a question and they answered a different question? Maybe one of those “Say what?” moments? Well, it looks like we have one of those in this gospel reading today. But first, let’s back up a bit. In the section of Mark’s Gospel that we just heard, we find Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem for the Passover. They’ve been here 3 or 4 days; it’s hard to tell which, from Mark’s description. On their way to Jerusalem, Jesus has been preparing his disciples for the fate that awaits him there. He has told them 3 times that he will be killed and then rise again.

Two days after they arrive in Jerusalem, Jesus drives out of the Temple all the commercial activities that had developed there. Many of them were probably related to the huge number of animal sacrifices being performed in the Temple. After that, Jesus has had several confrontations with various decidedly unfriendly members of the religious establishment. Most of them resulted in Jesus either condemning their abuse of religious authority or teaching a lesson about God’s Kingdom. Some of his best-known teachings occurred during those sessions. Here are some examples;

- There’s the parable about the vineyard and the wicked tenants.
- There’s a trick question regarding the woman who had been successively the wife of seven brothers.
- Another trick question about whether it was lawful for Jews to pay taxes to the Roman emperor.
- An exchange with one Scribe who asked him what is the greatest commandment, and agreed with his answer that it was Love God and neighbor.
- Preaching about the Scribes who were more concerned with appearances than in helping the poor in dire need.
- The teaching about the widow’s mite.

All that and more took place in the day or 2 between the clearing of the Temple and where we pick up the story in today’s reading.

Now, probably weary from all the contentiousness, as they leave the Temple for the last time, one of the disciples comments to Jesus about the grandeur of the Temple buildings. Jesus doesn’t appear to be very impressed. He quickly announces that the lovely buildings will soon be totally destroyed.

Then there appears to be a little bit of a time warp, and when we pick up the action again, they’re on the Mount of Olives with Jesus seated and talking to Peter, Andrew, James and John. It’s not much of a time warp because the Mount of Olives is just outside the wall of the city and they probably would have a very clear view of that magnificent Temple. The author, Mark, seems to want us to notice that Jesus is seated, the customary position for teachers. The four disciples ask Jesus, “Tell us, when will this be? And what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”.

We actually get just the first 4 verses of Jesus’ reply in our reading today. He warns them that there will be imposters, wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, and famines. Now that’s a lot to worry about, but it’s just the beginning. It actually goes on for another 29 verses, all the way to the end of the chapter. In that part, Jesus continues at length about what’s to come. Let me read just a few lines from that section:

“But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.”

There are two things in particular that I’d like to note in what I just read:

- First, what Jesus is talking about is not just the destruction of the Temple, which seemed to be what the disciples were asking; instead, he’s talking about the end of the age when he returns in glory,
- and second, Notice the literary style of this text.

If you have ever read or heard much of the Revelation to John, you probably recognized this style of writing. It even has a special name; it’s called apocalyptic or apocryphal writing. In the Old Testament, it’s found in the book of Daniel and some of the prophets (such as Isaiah), so Jesus and the general population of that time would have been familiar with this style. In the New Testament, the best example is, of course, the Revelation to John. Apocalyptic writings have a very special purpose. Even though they are full of doom and gloom; idols, dragons and demons; natural and supernatural catastrophes, their overall purpose is not to predict the future; it’s not to scare people, but to encourage and reassure them. Oh, there may be serious problems, but no matter how dire the situations or scenarios painted in these writings, the real purpose is to assure the reader or listener that God is in control. Violence and strife do not have the final word; God always has the final word. Only God endures forever. And only God determines where and when and how it will all end. Anything else is idolatry.

Jesus’ words may be a warning to those early listeners about what is going to happen to Jerusalem in about 40 years or so; total destruction, not just of the Temple, but the whole city of Jerusalem and even the nation of Judea. But I think it is also Jesus’ way of trying to prepare these special men, and us as well, for what the future could have in store for them and us. If we look at all the events and tribulations included in the verses we heard today as well as all those we didn’t hear, we could realize that many of them are happening today and always have been; wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, famines. At some times and in some places, the situation is much, much worse, including demonic persecution and death, just because people believe in Jesus.

So there certainly are important lessons in Jesus’ words for those early disciples and us to learn. It’s also clear that in them great emphasis is placed on vigilance, being awake and aware. As citizens of this country, we often hear it said that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. As citizens of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus tells us that eternal vigilance is also the price of discipleship. Instead of being led astray, we must forever be on guard against those idols and demons that can so easily beguile us and lead us to a loss of faith in God’s eternal goodness.

Jesus often encountered demons and idols during his ministry. It seems like he was very often driving away demons and warning people to get their priorities straight. Idols are those things that work their way into our lives and wind up being higher than God on our list of priorities. Demons are those practices, desires, and values that set us up with idols. We choose our idols; our demons choose us.

So take heart, and remember Jesus' final words in this chapter of Mark's gospel: "... what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."