IOPT SERMON HARVEST

Luke 21:5-11 + 20-24

**5**Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, **6**“As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.”

**7**“Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”

**8**He replied: “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. **9**When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.”

**10**Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. **11**There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven…

**20**“When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. **21**Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. **22**For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. **23**How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. **24**They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

SERMON

The author Richard Foster writes beautifully about the Hebrew word*hesed*. This is a word so rich with meaning that translators struggle to find an English equivalent, often rendering it “loving kindness” or “steadfast love.” The Psalmist often sings about. It is a “steadfast love” of the Lord that “never ceases”.

*Hesed* was central to the laws around harvest time in the bible. Farmers were to leave some of the crop along the borders and the grain that fell on the ground during harvest so that the poor could gather it (Leviticus 19:9–10). The vineyards and the olive groves were not to be stripped bare, to make provision for the needy.

I want to suggest that we look at the situation in Israel and Palestine through the eyes of *hesed*, or Godly compassion.

Way back in 2016 the General Assembly of the URC agreed to a resolution calling for the URC to deepen its understanding of the situation in Israel and Palestine. To that end, it arranged for a pilgrimage or an educational tour, inviting each Synod to send a delegate so that they could return and share the findings of the group. Since then, the group has been phenomenally active, with well over 200 engagements and talks and sermons given to share what we learned. All this work has resulted in a series of ten resolutions that were taken in this year’s (2021) July General assembly. Among other things, these resolutions have asked local congregations to continue learning about the situation, to continue praying, to continue supporting our work in the region through programmes like Commitment for Life and Christian Aid. The URC has also said that the occupation of Palestine by the vastly superior military force of Israel is against international law, and that the ongoing displacement of Palestinians from their ancestral homes not only is against things like the Geneva Convention, these actions cannot be justified. They are, in this morning’s language, not *hesed*, not compassionate. The URC has not used the term Apartheid, but I can tell you as a White South African who grew up under Apartheid, a person who knows Apartheid from the inside, what I saw was as bad, if not worse, than South Africa 30 years ago.

The URC has asked its investment teams to withdraw any funds from companies who benefit from the occupation, not as a punishment for Israel, or some desire to delegitimise the Israeli State, but because of *hesed*, the desire for compassion. But what about todays’ reading?

In Luke 21 we read how 2000 years ago, Jesus stood on the Temple Mount and made some rather alarming predictions about the future of the Temple. Very soon not one stone will be standing here, in fact there will be a devastating war and it will be untold generation before the temple will be restored. I can imagine that those standing around listening to this must have thought he was deranged: you recall that they began this conversation impressed by the size, and majesty and glory of the engineering, and could not imagine a time when everything would collapse. Of course, not many decades later in 70 AD Jesus’ prediction came true as Romans armies swept in to burn and dismantle the temple. Jesus was not exercising magic here, simply reading the signs of the times and extrapolating the logical outcomes. But for those who could not see what was right in front of them, it must have seemed crazy talk.

I chose this text for this morning because in some ways, it foreshadowed a very recent conflict we have been reading about in the news, where the Palestinian residents in the East Jerusalem borough of Sheikh Jarrah have been protesting their eviction orders from the Israeli Supreme Court. This most recent skirmish sits in a long line of quarrels and battles over two thousand years of competing claims over this piece of real estate..

For Jews this is the famous Mount Moriah. Tradition has it that Adam was buried here, where Abraham almost sacrificed his son, where Solomon built the first temple, later rebuilt by Herod the Great, and destroyed by the occupying Roman armies. For Muslims this is where Muhammad began his ascension to heaven from the stone beneath the dramatic, golden-domed Al Aqsa Mosque. For Christians this is the place where Jesus taught his disciples and where he walked where Crusaders built a church and abbey as a symbol of devotion and conquest.

Our URC education group was up and awake by 4.30 heading up to the Old City to watch the sunrise over Jerusalem, and to visit The Dome of the Rock. The tension was palpable with a heavy Israeli security presence. I was banned from entering simply for having a small cinema camera around my neck, but still big enough I imagine to hide explosives.

Some the Orthodox Jews predict the building of a third Temple on the Mount to usher in the arrival of the Messiah. Several right-wing extremist plans to blow up the Dome of the Rock to make way for that new Temple have been thwarted. Add to that the controversial recent move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, the massively expanded Jewish settlement programme in the West Bank, the humanitarian crisis in the open-air prison that is Gaza, and it’s understandable that security teams are in a constant state of high alert.

Of course, if you are a Jew with strong Zionist beliefs, then all the land from the Mediterranean Sea to Jordan River not only belongs to Jews; it was given to Jews by God. That’s the meaning of the flag – blue water to blue water. But most Zionists today are Christians who believe God gave Israel to the Jews, and if they want to displace the godless Philistines, who are we to say otherwise?

However, for many other Jews, orthodox, liberal, and non-religious, this Zionist interpretation of scripture is a cynical misuse of the text to justify a new form of colonialism. They say Israel should never have been the solution to the problem of European antisemitism and expulsion of Jews.

Where does that leave us today? Jesus’ prediction about the troubles that would follow the destruction of the Temple remain with us to this day. And for you and me, as Christians, what happens in and around the temple still matters, and we want to see *hesed* done. That was Jesus’ point about the temple: without compassion ,without justice, then every temple, church, or mosque betrays the heart of God.

Commitment for Life certainly does not for a minute suggest that it has the answers to the incredibly complex power and social dynamics in Palestine and Israel, but we desire a genuine effort to abide by international law at the very least. We want to see *hesed*, shalom, a deep and genuine peace, that is not predicated on shallow identities like being Christian, or Jew, or Muslim, or Israeli, or Palestinian. We want to see the nature of God’s love that transcends all boundaries, that places the widow, orphan, weakest and most vulnerable first. SO allow me to thank you for your ongoing support of Commitment for Life as we faithfully pursue *hesed* not only in Palestine, but in all the world. Amen.