

## **Week of November 16-17: How do we react to tragedy?**

### **1. It is probably impossible for us to understand the significance of the Temple in the life of religious Jews of 2000 years ago.**

Herod the Great began its' construction in 19 BC and it wasn't finished until 63 AD, just 7 years before it was destroyed; it was one of the most impressive buildings in the world with 80 ton, gold plated stones that made the Temple walls gleam against the drab, Judean desert.

And so it is no wonder that Jesus' disciples were so impressed; if ever a building looked eternal, this was it. Surely anyone who gazed upon the Temple would have thought that this would be a building that would last forever. Consequently when Jesus spoke about its' destruction, his followers naturally wanted to know when such an event would take place. Jesus answers their question, but not with an exact timeline or with scientific facts and dates. Rather he speaks in vivid but inconclusive language.

The thought of what was to come brought tears to Jesus' eyes and an ache to his heart; after all, the Temple is where he was presented to Simeon & Anna, who recognized him as the anointed one of the Lord. And then at the age of 12, Jesus spent 3 days in the Temple listening to & teaching religious leaders.

There is a hidden lesson in the destruction of the Temple and that is we must make sure that our ultimate faith is not anchored to the shifting sands of anything that can decay and disappear, no matter how permanent it may appear to us.

### **2. This above mentioned tragedy caused me to wonder how are we to react when life throws us an unexpected curve?**

May I suggest that joy is to be the Christian way of looking at life, even when our world is turned upside down. After all, Jesus lived & died on earth so as to restore us to the joy that humanity lost through sin. And during his parting words at the Last Supper, Jesus said: These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your own joy may be abundant (John 15:11).

You see, joy is our birthright and as such it is more of a state of being than any passing experience. Now joy is not the same as pleasure; we certainly appreciate pleasure, but we live for joy because joy brings gratitude that interrupts the routine motion of life.

I'm certainly not suggesting that Jews ought to have been grateful for the destruction that befell their temple & city, but joy looks at what God has given us insofar that we now have a hope in things yet to come and that hope carries us beyond the day to day difficulties that impact our lives.

### **3. And so, what brings joy?**

I think that a sense of wonder brings joy, as when we make our peace with mystery and in doing so, give up the need to try and control our future. Furthermore it would seem that God has left pebbles along our paths so as to enhance our enjoyment of life. For instance, do we appreciate our senses? What if we were made of rubber or steel; then we would not be able to experience the warmth of another's embrace or the magic of a kiss. Or what about smell? What delight there is in the scents that come from something cooking on the stove? And then we have color and thus are able to enjoy the beauty of flowers as well as the magnificence of sunrises and sunsets; and finally, how different our lives would be without music or taste? None of these were necessary for our salvation, but all are gifts from God who wishes to enrich our lives. By appreciating these "pebbles," we deepen our lives. And so we are meant to enjoy ordinary experiences here on earth; even for the Messiah, the Father used Nazarenean clay. We ourselves are earthen vessels.

Also people who are capable of forgiveness are joyful. Certainly forgiveness is not forgetting nor is it excusing, but forgiveness is starting over and trying again with the person who has caused us pain. Anger can be like a cancer that eats away at our soul, but forgiveness is a miracle of holding out our hands to the offending party.

And as a final point, knowing that we have a wonderful destination brings about joy; and to this end, we need to roll away the stone and let the Resurrected Jesus take over our lives. Knowing what lies ahead helps us to survive the mini-hells of life; believing that in the worst case scenario, God's love for us will sustain us and help us to survive. All of this makes for a joyful person.

**4. Strangely enough, we can be our own worse enemies when it comes to being joyful; in other words, we are capable of taking away our own joy.**

SO LET'S LOOK AT SOME OF THESE DESTRUCTIVE TENDENCIES:

- a. Total accountability is the illusion that we are accountable for all the ills in the world or all the ills in OUR OWN world, as though we can carry on our little backs a load that Jesus alone could bear. We simply cannot fix all of life's tragedies and we need to remember that as we try to help another with whatever capacities are at our disposal. Even Mother Theresa only tried to help the person in front of her and didn't allow herself to be overwhelmed by the needs of all the other people in the world.
- b. Then there is problem catastrophizing which happens when we inflate problems to the size of catastrophes, thus making every problem hopeless and therefore unsolvable for us. We must learn how to turn catastrophes back into problems, problems that we can manage.
- c. And then sometimes we allow ourselves to only focus upon our own hurts, as when we brood over depressing memories; such activities lead us to think that nothing good is ever happening in our lives. We fail to look at the larger picture as when we only allow ourselves to view our own problems and nothing else, thus losing balance and a sense of proportionality.

- d. Finally, there is irritability that makes us prone to anger and pushes us towards hostility as when we are frustrated over not getting what we believe that we deserve.

**6. It is further possible for us to kill one another's joy:**

- a) For instance, when we refuse to let them have satisfaction of giving their gift, whatever it may be; to this end, I recall a story about my Mother & me. I only had a \$15.00 monthly allowance prior to my ordination and so I had to save up in order to buy my Mother an orchid corsage for my ordination day, only to be told: "Oh baby, that really isn't my color" and so she didn't wear the corsage (needless to say, that was the last time I bought flowers for my Mother for a very, very, very long period of time).
- b) Then there are occasions when we speak the absolute truth by saying hurtful things. "Gained some of weight, haven't you?" What is the point of this hurtful type of honesty?
- c) And we can bring about hurt by refusing to listen to another's story as when our need to speak out weighs our interest in what another has to say. Sadly we sometimes talk so much that we don't even realize that someone around us is in some serious pain.
- d) And finally we can take away someone's joy when we diminish another's accomplishments, perhaps out of jealousy. We are here to love and support one another; life is not meant to be a competition. I read a wonderful story about a native Indian child from Canada; this boy always knew the answers to the teacher's questions, but when the teacher decided to make the quiz a competition by giving out prizes, he no longer raised his hand. The teacher later discovered that he didn't want to hurt his fellow students by winning all the prizes. That child got what life is all about. There is nothing wrong with friendly competition as long as we don't allow the need to win rule our lives.

**7. Again we gain meaning/significance out of life by accepting that life is ok at its' core, even though it is frayed around the edges.**

Our lives, for the most part, are motion and struggle. Most of us spend our days crawling, groping, climbing, sometimes running but always moving like the works of a clock. But now and then, joy comes to arrest this motion and it stops the tedious ticking of our life-clock with the bracing discovery that we have received a gift, but more than a gift, an invitation to be one with our God.

And so it behooves all of us, in every generation, to be watchful, to use the precious gift of time wisely, knowing that there is an end coming to everything human. But here is the good news from Jesus: the end is not oblivion or meaningless. At the end, whenever and however it comes to each of us, there is God, the One Jesus said knows every hair of our head, the One who loves us to the very end and beyond... If this understanding of life doesn't give us joy, then I wonder what will?