

May I speak in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, you can tell from our gospel set for today that the advent season is nearly upon us. The advent clouds are gathering. What we have there in the gospel is an apocalyptic reading, which can also be found in Matthew and Mark. And Jesus here sounds like one of the great Old Testament prophets crying, "The end is near." He talks about what must happen before the end will come. There will be wars and rumors of wars. Nations will rise against nation, earthquake, famine and plague, and a whole host of dreadful portents. All good advent things that will be coming back to in the weeks to come.

And I'm just going to focus on the beginning of our gospel reading. It starts with some innocent idle chit chat about the temple. All this stuff about walls, earthquakes, and famine was kicked off by a couple of the disciples quietly admiring the temple. Little did they know when they commented on the beauty of the temple where it would lead. In fact, I reckon that if they did know where it would have led, they might well have kept their mouths shut. Our passage begins, "Some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God", and there was indeed much to admire about the temple. It was the second temple built in the sixth century BC when the people of Israel returned from exile in Babylon. They rebuilt Solomon's temple, and it was obviously a very spectacular building. The historian Josephus, who was a contemporary of Jesus, wrote this.

"The temple was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and at the first rising of the sun reflected back a very fiery splendor and made those who forced themselves to look upon it, to turn their eyes away. Just as they would have done at the sun's rays." The disciples, like many others would have admired the temple's splendor. That's what they were doing when Jesus chimes in. "As for these things that you see," he says, "The days

will come when not one stone will be left upon another and all will be thrown down."

And that would have been a very, very hard thing for the disciples and Jesus' hearers to hear and grasp. The temple was big and beautiful and also it was at the very center of Israel's national life. The equivalent for us would be to hear that the White House, the Washington Memorial and the Statue of Liberty were all coming down at the same time. In fact, maybe even more than that because the temple also embodied the nation of Israel's spiritual history. The temple symbolized 1000 years of God's dealing with his people. And Jesus said its days were numbered.

Jesus was sure that some things weren't going to stay as they were. He was certain that an end was coming. And I was interested in what comes next. The disciples say, "When will this be and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" In other words, they tried to pin Jesus down. They want things to be clear. They want certainty. Is this happening soon? Are we talking days, months, years? And they don't get the answer that they're looking for. Jesus says elsewhere, "No one knows about that day or hour. Not even the angels in heaven nor the son, but only the father." Every gospel is clear about this. There will be an end, but we don't know when it will happen. The son of man will come we're told, like a thief in the night when least expected.

And I want to explore the twin strands which are embedded in Jesus's teaching. The twin strands being certainty and uncertainty. Things we can be sure of and things we can't. There's a dance going on between these two, which we all know something about. There are some things of which we can be certain, although I must say the older I get, that list of certainty gets shorter and shorter. And in this advent season we're reminded that one of the things we can be certain about is that one great day God will act to establish his new kingdom. That will be as the prophet Isaiah said, "A new heaven and a new earth," and we're reminded

of this great truth in our Eucharist each week, which we celebrate until He comes again.

The gospels encourage us to be certain about this end, and that's good. Ends make sense of things. We all know that satisfaction of getting to the end of a book that has a good end, it makes sense. That's why Agatha Christie's still so popular. You get to the end of her books and everything makes sense. You look back and you think, "Oh, that's why so-and-so did that and that's why that was found there." Things fall into place. Everything's revealed. And so it is with history. Jesus says there will one day be a day of reckoning when God judges the world and all will be restored and put right. The world is not going to simply drift on interminably. History is not like one of those awful modern novels which just seems to peter out. You get to the last page and it just drifts into the sand. There's no closure or resolution.

If I didn't think God would act like that, then personally I couldn't make sense of life. When I think of the scale of human suffering, the countless billions of people whose names I will never know, I can't bear to think that no one, that no God is noticing. That God isn't there waiting to restore all that has been lost. And there's that interplay again. I'm certain God will come. I'm certain God will act righteously, but I have no idea about how that will be made manifest. I don't know when God's resolution will come, but I'm sure that what looks permanent now won't last.

So let me speak now of uncertainty. Something we can't escape. In fact, the main thing that we can say about uncertainty is that it's inevitable. We can be certain of that. Our own Jonas Salk said, "To await certainty is to await eternity." And yet uncertainty can be a crippling condition. I've noticed from seeing people in hospital over the years that people who've been told they have a very serious illness are often in a better mental state than people who are waiting for test results, to see what the illness is that they have. It would appear that it's easier to know about one's condition to be in a

state of not knowing. Because when you know you could begin to strategize and cope.

And we have a hint of that in our epistle from Two Thessalonians, it's the second epistle to that church. In the first one, which may be the earliest writings of the New Testament, St. Paul had led the church in Thessalonica to believe that Jesus' return was eminent and some of the Thessalonians had responded by giving up on life. They were idly waiting around for this great day to come. And so St. Paul had to write to them again to correct the impression that he'd given first time round. So he's backpedaling here, he's saying, "Don't give up on life, don't be idle as we don't know how long it will be till Jesus' return." And he's encouraging the Thessalonians to respond positively to the uncertainty which surrounds them.

And I want to close by offering two thoughts about uncertainty. The first is that we like the Thessalonians should strive to respond positively to uncertainty. We're to stay engaged in times of uncertainty. And you don't need me to tell you that our national life would appear to be in a state of flux at the moment. We don't know where or what's going to happen, but we're to stay engaged. We should commit to staying part of the process. Practicing that civil discourse which Rebecca encourages us to be part of. We're not to withdraw from political life, to not bother voting, to not bother being interested in whatever party is ours. We're to stay engaged, to respond positively, to seek to make a difference.

Now, the second thought is more personal and spiritual. I came across this quote from Brene Brown, which I can identify with. "I spent a lot of years trying to outrun or outsmart vulnerability by making things certain and definite black and white, good and bad. My inability to lean into the discomfort of vulnerability, limited the fullness of those important experiences that are wrought with uncertainty. Love, belonging, trust, joy and creativity, to name a few." I bet I'm not the only one who can identify with that. I'm still learning that I should not be afraid of uncertainty. It's

something to be embraced as it's only when we give up trying to control things to make them certain that we can enter into the vulnerability in which faith is nurtured.

And perhaps it shouldn't be surprising to remind ourselves that faith and certainty are opposites. Faith necessarily includes an element of doubt and uncertainty. The writer to the Hebrews describes faith as the conviction of things not seen. If we could prove it, it wouldn't be faith. So let me close by going back to where we started with the imagery of the temple. I invite you to look at what might be the temples in your own life. What shining evidence, edifice gives us confidence? What do we base our confidence and sense of certainty on? It could be our material possessions, our career, our politics, our relationships, our intellect, our looks, and let's hear that reminder from Jesus that they like everything else won't last. How do we feel about that? It need not fill us with fear. As true faith rests on something, someone more permanent.

We might even find that as we dare to let go of those temples, as we lean into uncertainty, we start to grow and become people who truly live by faith, who embrace the inevitable uncertainty, which surrounds us. Let's embrace uncertainty and find ways of responding positively.

Amen.