

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

Whilst I remember, let me just give thanks to my mother who's watching from home in England who sent all our poppies. So, she'll see that they've arrived. Thanks, mum.

So, today's readings are a stark reminder that Advent is fast approaching, so buckle up. The readings that we've heard this morning and that we'll be hearing over the next few weeks have a dark, foreboding tone, which is characteristic of the Advent season. That the stage is set in that first reading we heard from the prophet Malachi, which begins with these words: "See the day is coming." Jesus picks up with his warning about the coming days of destruction of the temple and the arrival of the end.

And we'll be hearing much more about this kind of thing in the weeks to come as Advent gets going. I want to take as my text this morning, these words from Jesus. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified. For these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." What strikes me in this verse is Jesus' instruction to the disciples, "Do not be terrified." I'm reminded of the man who boasted of his modesty. And one of his friends responded, "Well, you have a lot to be modest about."

When Jesus says to the disciples, "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified," I can imagine one of the disciples saying, "Well, we've a lot to be terrified about." Wars and insurrections naturally lead to fear and terror. That was as true in Jesus' day as it is now. We, like the disciples, have a lot to be terrified of. I read this week in the paper about a man in our own state whose house was destroyed by a meteorite. I don't know if you saw that. I have a long list of things to be afraid of. Meteorites weren't on them until this week. Now I had to add that.

Jesus identifies other things on the list. Earthquakes, plagues, famine. We've had all of them, plus a meteorite in the last couple of years.

We have much to be terrified of. And things might even be said to have got worse recently because we live in a climate of fear. The pandemic ratcheted up the fear level in our society. The recent election that we've had just seemed to me to be two parties going at great lengths and expense to tell us how much we should be afraid of what would happen if the other party got into power. Seemed to me that fear replaced policy. Our news comes in short news cycles, and the headlines lurch from one catastrophe to another. The media would have us believe that things are going from bad to worse, and maybe they are. The poppies remind us of the Killing Fields in Flanders in the First World War where hundreds of thousands of people died needlessly.

And still today there are people in Europe digging trenches for war in Ukraine to reinforce their positions. But this time, it's happening against the background of a nuclear threat. So, I'd like to ask Jesus, "When we hear of wars and insurrections, what do you mean don't be terrified? Why not? Is there an alternative response?"

Now, of course I'm not going to get that question answered directly, but I think that if we look closer at today's gospel, I think we can get an idea of the kind of things that Jesus might have said in response. I think the first thing he said is, "Don't be surprised by chaos and disaster. Expect it." The whole discussion that's going on in that gospel reading was prompted by some idol chit chat amongst the disciples as they walked through the streets of Jerusalem. They looked up at the magnificent temple there, which had been at the heart of Jewish faith, life, and custom for hundreds and hundreds of years.

"See how beautiful it is? See how it's covered with precious and beautiful stones?" They were no doubt inspired by its size, its grandeur, its sense of permanence. Jesus said, "That temple is coming down. It won't last. The days are coming when not one stone will be left upon another." That was a shocking statement to his hearers. It would be like someone today saying, "The White House, the Lincoln Memorial, Wall Street, they're all falling

down. They're all going to be turned to rubble." Think how destabilizing that would be. The fabric of our culture, the things we looked to for security and continuity, we'd all think they were collapsing. The disciples looked at the temple and saw the biggest, boldest, most unshakable symbol of God's presence they could imagine. The glitz of the temple spoke to them of religious certainty and permanence.

Jesus looked at the temple and saw something completely different. He saw fragility, not permanence. Loss, not glory. Change, not stasis. Jesus saw that all must break and buckle and end before new hope and new life can emerge. Jesus saw the necessity of death before the promise of resurrection. Jesus is inviting the disciples to look beyond the grandeur of the temple and recognize that God cannot be contained, predicted, or domesticated. God exceeds every edifice, every institution, every symbol that has ever been created in his name. God is always beyond our understanding and expectations. Barbara Brown argues that disillusionment is a sexual element in the Christian life. She says, "Disillusionment is literally the loss of an illusion about ourselves, about the world, about God. And whilst it is always a painful thing, it is never a bad thing to lose the lies that we have mistaken for the truth."

The disciples would have been disillusioned to hear about the destruction of the temple. And we too need to embrace a spiritual journey that will no doubt include rubble, ruin, failure, and disappointment because only God is constant. Everything else will ultimately disappoint. Everything else we've put our hope in will fail. The only certain thing in life is uncertainty. But amidst all the chaos and uncertainty, God is God. He is steadfast and he is working his purposes out. We need to embrace our vision to include that glorious truth. We need to expand our vision beyond the endless news cycles of doom and see a bigger picture that's worked out not over days or weeks, but over millennia. And see a bigger picture that tells a bigger story about a God who acted to create the world. Who out of his great love has

acted to redeem and save that world. Who has reached out to his beloved creatures and will one day act again to restore his creation. That's the context in which we should understand all the talk of wars and insurrections. That's why Jesus can say, "Do not be terrified."

That's why, as people of faith, we can say with Mother Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Such a state, that isn't fantasy. It's not escaping. Our fears are real. There are many things to be fearful of. But we believe that evil and sin, the forces of death and destruction, will never have the final word. We are a people of hope. We are a people of faith. We are a people who believe in a God of love. We believe contrary to what the world believes, contrary to how things may seem, that God is working his purposes out.

Let me close by reading some other words from Jesus, from John's gospel. Jesus said, "Peace is what I leave with you. It is my own peace that I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not be worried and upset. Do not be afraid."

May each of us take these words to heart, and where there is fear, may we find peace.

Amen.