

After Destruction - Introduction to the theme

Does anyone know what the international day is on Wednesday?

Here's a clue, it's about something we all use multiple times every day and we probably wouldn't think about it until we use one that's very different or have to go without.

It will be...

...World toilet day.

So what's the connection between our theme today and World toilet day?

I think the reason it jumped out at me is that there are so many things we don't miss until they are gone. But also, there are other things that we hold onto too tightly and it is a trauma to lose. However, having to give things up is also a chance for growth and change.

After Destruction - Reflection

Isaiah 65:17-25

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Last week in our Haggai reading, we heard of the despondence of the people at the look of the temple. How could they worship God in such a shadow of the former glory of what the Temple once was? They had their eyes gilded by nostalgia and the stories of the ages gone by and that was what they wanted for themselves. Luke's audience were experiencing a similar set of issues.

The Temple that was rebuilt after the Exile was then upgraded by Herod. Horrible histories can have a field day with Herod, and for good reason. The pun of the day was that it was safer to be his pigs than his sons. Herod wanted to be recognised as Jewish, for all he collaborated with Rome to gain personal power, and his restoration of the temple was part of proving his Jewish nature. It also took a long time to complete, and the final product was not seen by Herod the Great because the Temple was finished long after his death. It was a grand, imposing structure that was visible to all who came near to Jerusalem.

However, by the time the Gospel of Luke was written, the temple had been thrown down by the Roman army. The First Jewish Revolt had been a long series of clashes with the Roman army and ended with the siege and sacking of Jerusalem. Roman punishment was harsh, including burning the temple to the ground. The wailing wall is all that remains of the ruins of Herod's temple. History had repeated itself. Large numbers of Jewish people were killed, sold into slavery or forced to flee. It was like the Exile all over again.

Luke's Christian community probably did not experience these cataclysmic events firsthand, but they would have experienced the fallout from them. Until this point, they had been part of a weird little Jewish sect. They worshiped in local Synagogues and gathered in their own community spaces to listen to the other stories of the crucified Messiah. Now they were having to explore what it meant to carry on their faith when they are pushed out of the Synagogues and the Jewish scriptures were defined to exclude their Christian writings. In so many ways, they could identify with the Jews of the Exile who sang "how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land."

Luke's story "predicting" the destruction of the Temple is not just about a transfer of focus from the Jewish approach to the Temple to the Christian assertion that God can be worshiped anywhere. Indeed, now we would recognise that statement as a gross simplification, though it was one of the themes. Nor is it intended as a checklist against which we can work out when the "end times" are going to start happening. In virtually every generation since, there have been those who have attempted to do that and still we continue.

One of the reasons our culture can misread this text is because it belongs to a genre we no longer have in literature, and we have misused the name of this genre to mean something quite different. That genre is "apocalypse." This was popular for just over 1,000 years from the Maccabean rebellion in the mid-second century BCE. It was a genre that talks about the past as if it is the future to predict the current events and give the people hope. It was also a genre written with a lot of symbolism to ensure the people in power would not be able to interpret the real intent behind the stories.

So, it is not just that the temple has been torn down. Once again, the people are thinking "how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" They need to find a new way of expressing their faith when the old ways are no longer available as an option. The temple is torn down both literally and figuratively. The question for Luke's church is whether this is the beginning of another exile or the beginning of something new. Luke uses this to call people to have faith that something new will emerge, even if life feels at the moment as if it is full of destruction.

And what about us? We are in the process of building something new so we can communicate the Good News of God's love to a new generation. Our Temple might not be a physical temple, but it still exists in different ways. What "Temple" in your life or your relationship with God is holding you to the old ways at this point? What would it look like for that "temple" to be destroyed?

I think it is also worth listening to the Chinese wisdom of the word "crisis." In our culture, and perhaps in many cultures, the idea of crisis is seen as a negative. This is what Luke's audience were experiencing when they first hear the words of today's reading. However, the Chinese character for crisis is comprised of the symbols for danger and change point (often mistranslated as opportunity). Yes, there are dangers in our time of crisis or change, but without it, would we be pushed to the changes that are needed to look to the future?

If we reflect on the temples in our lives that have been destroyed (or perhaps need to be destroyed), what might come out of their ashes? Like the experience of Luke's community, this might not be immediately evident. It may be unsettling and challenging. It may consist of changes that we would rather not experience, but in that destruction, there is hope. Can we trust that God can use even the pulling down of the things we have held as sacred so that a new generation can truly experience God's love in a way that speaks to them?

If you were to write this as an apocalyptic story for the church today, how might that story be reframed to bring hope and a sense of the future for those who need to hear that message? May you know God's hope in your lives in even the most difficult times, and may that hope allow you to let go of the past in order to be part of God's new future.