

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
November 18, 2012
Pentcost XXV
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia

Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs."

There is a lot to love about GHTC. You know, mainline churches have been in decline for a generation, but bucking the trends GHTC is still going strong. In terms of average Sunday attendance, we are in the top ten percent of Episcopal Churches nationwide. We are not a "mega-church" and don't want to be. There is a human scale to things here, and that is another thing to love. And, let us not forget that since 2008, in the midst of the largest financial disaster since the Great Depression, we have been holding our own. That speaks volumes about your stewardship.

I also love the vital mission we undertake. I think we are doing more now than we ever have in terms of outreach. Did you know that this congregation puts more than \$100,000 each year into the Richmond community to help the needy. And that doesn't could the countless hours you put in.

Another thing I love about GHTC is the great variety of people and opinions there are within the congregation. This was especially notable in the context of the recent elections. You know there are some congregations which are predominantly made up of people who belong to one party or the other. And in those situations, it starts to feel like...and I am not saying this is necessarily true...but it starts to feel like what is most important is your political affiliation rather than your Christian faith.

At GHTC we enjoy a wide variety of perspectives, and clearly what unites us...and we are united...is our Christian faith and not some other value. We can be a living example of people who are able to talk to one another, and agree and disagree with compassion and civility. Maybe some people to the north of us in Washington should take notice.

Part of what got me thinking about this, is that within days of the election, I had some great conversations with members of this parish, from across the political spectrum. And I was fascinated by what was being said, and the thoughtfulness involved. The conversations revolved around the question, "What does it all mean? How can we read the demographics of the elections and so on. What are the signs of the times and to what do they point?" And then of course, there is the further question, "As a Christian, how should I respond? What is my role?"

Discerning the "signs of the times" is a very biblical activity. It is in particular, a prophetic activity. We sometimes think of prophets as biblical figures who predicted events that would happen far, far in the future...far beyond the life span of anyone who was listening to their words.

Now, of course, the words of the prophets were living words, and they were applied and reapplied as time moved on and they spoke to situations far beyond the ones in which they first spoke.

But, we must never lose sight of the fact that the prophets were speaking words that were comprehensible to their immediate listeners. Let me give you an example. You remember that once the Hebrew people came into the Promised Land, after their liberation from Egypt and their wilderness sojourn, they were a loose confederation of tribes, with not central authority. After a while, the people noticed that everyone around them had a king and so they decided they needed one too, in order to protect themselves they needed strong central authority. So they went to Samuel the prophet to get this done. Samuel was great they said, but you are old, getting ready to die and your sons are not cut out of the same piece of cloth. We need a king. Samuel was not pleased because he thought wanting a king was an unfaithful thing to do, after all, the LORD was king.

So Samuel the prophet told the people that if they wanted a king, well and good, but don't forget two things: 1) The Lord is your real king and 2) earthly kings will end up oppressing you.

Samuel said "This will be the practice of the king who will rule over you: He will take your sons and appoint them as his charioteers and horsemen...or they will have to plow his fields, reap his harvest, and make his weapons...He will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks and bakers. He will seize your choice fields...He will take a tenth part of your grain...The day will come when you cry out because of the king whom you yourselves have chosen; and the LORD will not answer you on

that day.” But the people would not listen to Samuel’s warning... “We must have a king (to) go out at our head and fight our battles.”

This sounds like our current conversation about the role of the federal government in some ways! Is a strong central authority a blessing or not?

You can see how this word of the prophet Samuel would have a long life and many applications. You can also see how his words grew out of and applied to the immediate situation.

You can see as well, that Samuel was reading the signs of the times. Jesus stands in the great prophetic tradition...from Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and more. Remember, when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time...as Matthew relates...”the whole city was thrown into an uproar, saying, ‘Who is this?’ And the crowds answered, ‘This is the prophet Jesus...”

It was all the more remarkable because for the previous 400 years Judah had not known prophets in the classical sense. But all of the sudden, here it was again.

Jesus was more than a prophet, but certainly he was at least that. And as a prophet he was a keen observer of the signs of the times.

And that is what is going on in our reading from Mark chapter 13 for today. These verses are often read as referring to “the end of the world.” While there are some passages in chapter 13 that refer in symbolic language about the “large scale future of the cosmos”¹ these verses do not. Jesus is talking about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem which he says will happen within the lifetime of his listeners.

And this Temple was the “most imposing structure for hundreds of miles in any direction” and Jesus says, not one stone will be left upon another, it will be destroyed. It was a sign of God’s judgment. Jesus looked around and knew that the path the people were on, a path of violent resistance to Rome, would end badly. Jesus was a person of peace. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Do to others as you would have them to do to you. Overcome evil with good. Jesus was all about breaking the cycle of violence.

Luke’s story of the final entry into Jerusalem spells it out clearly: “Now when Jesus approached the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you had only known on this day, even you, then things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” (19:41) Peace is infinite but there are limits to what violence can accomplish.

¹ Tom Wright “Mark for Everyone” page 178.

In my ramblings around this week I came across a quote from a speech by Edmund Burke, considered by many to be the father of modern conservatism. In a speech on conciliation with America delivered in 1775 he said: “The use of force alone is but *temporary*. It may subdue for a moment; but it does not remove the necessity of subduing again: and a nation is not governed, which is perpetually to be conquered.”

Jesus came to create a people for peace, and we are that people. It doesn't mean we are naïve, we understand the necessities of this world. But as followers of the prince of peace, our default is always to ask...ourselves and our elected officials...what are the things that make for peace? Where is that path?

With the path of violence, no stone will be left on stone. With the path of peace, we become builders.

So this is the good news for today: Go forth and build the things that make for peace. This is what it means to say, “Jesus is Lord.” Amen.