

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
**Proper 28-B; 18 November 2018**  
**St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster**  
(rev. 201811171132)

## **What Beautiful Stones!**

*In nomine...*

### **I. What Beautiful Stones!**

Look around you: what a beautiful building, right? Can you understand what the disciples were talking about as they came out of the temple? The space in which we worship was not built because this was the cheapest design its architect could come up with. It wasn't the most energy-efficient design or the most compact. This building is beautiful because that is what it was meant to be. It was meant to evoke the presence of God.

That's what the disciples were experiencing as they exited the temple with Jesus after going there to worship God. They were so overcome by the magnificence of the place that they gushed to Jesus, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"<sup>1</sup> "Large" here might be talking about size; it could also be translated more broadly as "wonderful" or "awesome."

Jesus' immediate reply is shocking, like a bucket of ice water being thrown over your head. Jesus the party pooper says, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."<sup>2</sup> What is Jesus going on about?

In fact, the temple would be destroyed in only a few decades, as Jesus shrewdly foresaw. But when the disciples ask Jesus when this is going to happen, he doesn't say, "Oh, in about 50 years." Jesus wasn't trying to warn them of the Temple's destruction. He was trying to warn his disciples that they were looking at the wrong things. They were seeing in the Temple echoes of the historical Kingdom of Israel rather than the present Kingdom of God.

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1 Mk 13.1 NRSV.

2 Mk 13.2 NRSV.

## **II. Buildings**

You may have heard me say in the past; and you'll hear me say again in the future: St. Thomas' is not a museum. Our buildings might be beautiful and of historical interest. But they weren't built to be period pieces, and they weren't handed down to us so we could feel nostalgic about St. Thomas'. When we get distracted by the buildings, we make the same mistake as the disciples. We look backwards and yearn for the way things used to be. But St. Thomas' is not a museum. This building is not a shrine unto "once upon a time." Instead, this is a consulate and supply post for those involved in bringing into reality the coming Kingdom God. We gather to engage in the mission of God: to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The temple in Jerusalem, the great Cathedrals of Europe, our beautiful little church building: these are places meant to evoke the presence of God, to remind us of what we're about. At some point the temple in Jerusalem stopped serving that function and afterwards, not one stone was left on another. But God's mission continued – unimpeded by the loss of that particular building.

## **III. Stewardship**

Today is the last Sunday in our Stewardship season. Are you ready for it to be over? We're not ready quite yet: not everyone has submitted pledge cards. If you haven't, please bring yours in next Sunday!

Stewardship is not about entry fees into a museum honoring the past. Those pledges are not about maintaining a pile of stones we call a church. Those pledges are not about paying salaries and electric bills and keeping the yard nice. Those pledges are about you and I looking forward, participating today and tomorrow in God's mission, just like the people who built this building before us, and just like those who will inherit it after us. It is the mission of God which stands the test of time, and that is the invitation of Jesus: to participate in something that will outlast every stone edifice. God's mission is "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."<sup>4</sup> God's mission will continue.

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3 BCP, 855.

4 BCP, 855.

#### **IV. Bibles**

Today is also Bible Sunday. Just like a building, a Bible can be encountered in different ways. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “Fundamentalism reads texts as if God were as simple as we are.” He goes on to observe, “That is unlikely to be true.”<sup>5</sup> Fundamentalists will use a Bible like it’s a museum, echoing with the power of a bygone era, and a history that has been written (and interpreted) by those with the loudest voices.

But a Bible is like a building in that its texts are beautiful and powerful not when they’re used to control others, but when one encounters within them the living presence of God. The Bible is a love story, written from a human point of view, telling of the ongoing romance between God and humankind. When we read the Bible, it’s not so we can recreate a bygone era we read about therein. The Bible provides us with a history and tradition that leads us forward into the coming Kingdom of God.

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (Schocken Books: 2015), p. 207.

#### **IV. Miscellany**

Today we can get distracted by all kinds of things. Buildings, organs, budgets and programs. Educational opportunities, our health or appearance, our jobs, and all manner of amusements like football games, streaming video, and video games. We like to sit still and watch others sweat and suffer. And none of these things are bad in and of themselves. Most of them are good. But someday, it is true, “not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Don’t get distracted by saviors, leaders, politicians or business people. Don’t get distracted by wars, rumors, and natural disasters. Don’t get distracted by buildings and a heritage of power or influence. These are all signs that the end has not yet come, that we still have work to do.

Those fourth graders who receive a Bible today are not being indoctrinated into something old, to be supporters of their parents’ religion. They’re being given a Bible and a tradition and a way of listening for God that will lead them forward to hear God’s *new* call into *their* lives.

The stones that make up our church building carry a lot of history, and a lot for us to be thankful for. But they’re not meant to leave us stuck in the past. Instead they are the firm foundation from which we can vault into the future.

God is at work at St. Thomas’. God is at work in the lives of our children. God is at work in the lives of each person here. God is healing our past and leading us into the future. God is doing something new among us. Not one stone will be left on top of another. Instead, if you let it, your life will be changed and become caught up in the mission of God. That mission is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

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6 BCP, 855.