

The Church, not the building

John Bellaimey, Feb 3, 2019

One morning in May, 1997, before dawn, the flashing lights of a fire engine awakened me. Someone was in trouble on our street. It turned out to be at St. John's, as I discovered a few minutes later, turning the corner to see hoses snaking across the intersection and water already trained on this beloved stone building. From the back yard of the house next door, I saw flames shooting out of the kitchen roof, and realized that our whole renovation project was about to be burned.

The fire fighters kept the flames away from the sanctuary, but the parish hall was going to be a wet, charred, smoky mess. Luckily, the office staff were lodged above the former Hawkinson's Groceries and the daycare had been moved to Linden Hills Congregational Church, God bless 'em. Luckily, we had really good insurance, because in the years before Donn Barber had insisted we upgrade to replacement-value insurance, instead of the regular kind. And thus the new kitchen that we couldn't afford was now going to happen.

We'd raised a lot of money for the renovations, and although we might have been discouraged that our church was so badly damaged, we quickly remembered that the building is not the church. We are.

The Jewish people in 70 AD had a much bigger problem. They not only lost their building, they lost their religion. The Emperor, fed up with Jewish rebellions, riots, and disrespect of the Roman occupation of Palestine, ordered Jerusalem demolished. Flattened. Emptied. Erased.

Most importantly, the Temple where all the sacrifices, ceremonies, and festivals had to occur was gone. Not a stone was left on stone. Hundreds of priests would never work again, and millions of required prayers could never be said. 244 commandments could no longer be kept.

The day the Temple was destroyed was the 9th of the month of Av in the year 70. That day is still known as the Catastrophe. As a cruel reminder of Rome's power, and a sarcastic gesture of mercy, the Emperor Hadrian decreed that Jews could only enter the former Jerusalem on that one day every year, and they had to be gone by sunset. Otherwise, it was a Roman City. They were welcome to come and weep at the Temple Mount, where they would find a new Temple of Jupiter.

They were welcome to pray to him. Jupiter was obviously superior to their weak and verbose god, Yahweh.

We can't really imagine. The Temple was their whole religion, or it seemed like it. For a thousand years, when you had a baby boy, you brought him into God's House to be circumcised. For a thousand years, on the thirtieth day, you brought your firstborn boy to God's House and made a small sacrifice to "redeem" him. For a thousand years, on the fortieth day after childbirth, the mother presented herself in God's House and got her status back as ritually pure after the unclean and risky experience of birth.

The Holy Family did all these things. They met two old and faithful Temple-dwellers. First, Simeon told them that their son would see into the hearts of many, and therefore cause conflict. And that Mary's heart would be pierced because of him. Sobering news on what was meant to be a happy occasion.

Second, Anna came along and predicted the baby's future: he would bring hope for everybody waiting for a much bigger "redeeming": the deliverance of Jerusalem from, we imagine, Roman humiliation.

Simeon asked God to let him die now, a detail that children always find terrifying, but the old man was happy: he had finally seen the Messiah. Catholic and Orthodox traditions say that Simeon and Anna were the last Old Testament prophets.

Mary pondered these new things in her heart, then left the Temple and headed home to Nazareth. They would come back often, especially at Passover. If you were Jewish, you went frequently to the Temple.

In Adult Forum today, a group of folks from our church are going to tell stories about the little village of Nueva Providencia, in Guatemala. The village came to be some time after a mudslide swept down a mountain slope, killing many and erasing the livelihood of a whole village. This was a Catastrophe, as well. Most were landless peasants, poorly-paid and always in debt to the masters of the plantation, or finca, in that valley.

A saintly and pragmatic Catholic priest from New Ulm, Minnesota named Greg Sheaffer figured out a way to buy nearby land from a bankrupt finca owner, and Sheaffer's mission in San Lucas Toliman deeded the land over to a few hundred

families, some from the shut-down finca, and some from the mudslide survivors. They built New Providence from scratch.

Volunteers from St. John's led by Bill Peterson began annual trips to work alongside the villagers doing whatever development project the village council organized. We provided a bit of labor and bought supplies at the hardware store or lumber yard. We improved our Spanish, which is the second language of the indigenous Maya-speaking villagers. We got blisters and made facebook friends. We've watched kids grow up, though even when quite young, they carried bags of sand uphill way faster than we could.

Like the villagers of Nueva Providencia, the Jews of Jerusalem were cast out, sleeping those first nights outdoors wherever they could. Many of them lost their religion and gradually intermarried with surrounding, non-Jewish people. Two groups, however, had already begun to create a spiritual life that required no Temple, no 244 commandments, no priests, no vestments, no sacrifices.

The first group were the Pharisees, who the Gospels often denigrate. They believed that every Jew--not just the priests--should fulfill all the commandments of the Torah. They wanted everyone to study the Bible, not just the scribes. And after the fall of the Temple, they became a religion of synagogues in every town, scrolls in every synagogue, and rabbis for leaders. Teachers, not Priests. Leadership from alongside, not above. Judaism thus became portable, and the 244 obsolete commandments were like heirloom china or an old family album: *we used to do this when we had a Temple.*

The second group of Jews who were already leaving Temple religion behind when the Catastrophe happened were the Jesus People. Not yet called by the Greek name *Christian*, our ancestors replaced the House of God with the Son of God.

The letter to the Hebrews that we just heard describes him as way more qualified than any High Priest, because rather than merely entering a very holy sanctuary in the House of God and addressing the heavens, Jesus was *from the heavens*. But not just a divine tourist, come down to take pity on the poor mortals. He was born poor and mortal himself. Who better qualified to bridge the gap between heaven and earth?

Christianity says, "we don't need a building, or priests, or sacrifices. We have Jesus." Now of course our denominations have spent much fortune on buildings,

priests, and art, and plenty of people, when they say “I am going to church,” they’re thinking about a building.

But despite how much Jesus’ Jewish parents loved the Temple and how much we love this building, a building is not the church. Any more than your house is your family. Or your office is your company.

What makes us church is Jesus. He’s our ancestor, our way-finder, our companion, our brother, our impossibly-perfect role model. He’s selling nothing. He travelled so simply. He loved so flagrantly. He was good with kids. He was so brave. Think of all the ways you want to be a better person, and he’s totally ready to help you with that.

Jesus of Nazareth died way back then, 40 years before the Catastrophe, because I believe that his resurrection keeps him in the present tense. Maybe it’s just a metaphor, but I don’t think so: I think he is real. He’s around now. We don’t just admire him as a great character in a classic story. We are not just inspired by his example. Jesus is, for most of us, our wise and unshakeable guide. I get unwise and shaky, but he never does.

The Sunday Forum this morning will be a vivid illustration of what Presiding Bishop Michael Curry calls the Way of Love. Rather than simply admiring Jesus’ teaching, the St. John’s folks who go to Nueva Providencia are doing his teaching. Curry picked seven verbs to describe it:

Turn - Learn - Pray - Worship - Bless - Go - Rest. Some of us specialize in one or two of them, but for a balanced life, we need them all. In Adult Forum next week and the week after, my wife Lynnell Mickelsen and I will be unpacking those verbs in reverent and irreverent ways. We hope you will join us.

The fire at St. John’s was a stumbling block, but not for long. The landslide in Guatemala and the destruction of Jerusalem were true catastrophes, but with the help of so many positive, brave, kind people traveling the way of love, the catastrophe was not the end of the story.

So this morning we pray for grace to be the church, not just to go to church.