

Sermon Proper 28 Year C

The Penultimate

[RCL] Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

There are some words that *just sound good*, that are attractive all by themselves. A great example, which the Gospel reading especially brought to mind, is ‘penultimate’. It’s a fine old Latin word that means ‘next to the last’. Not the last, not the ultimate, but next to that, before that. The penultimate things are not the ultimate things, but the things that are a step down from them, the things come before the ultimate thing.

Penultimate is a great word to hear and ponder as we listen to these wonderful Biblical stories about the end of all things, about “dreadful portents and great signs from heaven” and the day of the Lord burning like an oven, and how not one stone will be left upon another. We always hear stuff like this as we get close to Advent; it’s good for us, and these saying are really all about that little word.

Let’s start with the temple in Jerusalem. In the first century, the temple was absolutely the center of Jewish religion, history, culture, civilization and civic pride. It was a beautiful temple, one of the best in the region. Solomon himself had designed it, and King Herod had recently completely renovated it - making it quite a bit bigger and a whole lot more elaborate.

In its thousand-year history, the Temple had never been as glorious, as extensive, or as popular as it was when Jesus and his disciples visited. In fact, it may have been the largest man-made structure in the world at that time. It was certainly seen as the ultimate thing in Israel—and as central, indeed indispensable, to the plan of God and the fate of the nation.

When Jesus and his disciples visited the temple for the first time, the disciples were like a bunch of strangers in the big city, staring around with their jaws hanging open, pointing at everything and saying “wow” a lot. Jesus isn’t quite as impressed, and he says two things about the Temple.

First, he predicts, quite correctly, that the Temple would soon be completely destroyed—that not one stone would be left upon another - which is exactly that the Romans did about 35 years later, after an unsuccessful Jewish rebellion.

That’s the first thing Jesus says. The second is more subtle.

As he predicts the destruction of the temple, and the chaos that goes with it, Jesus also says, (again quite correctly) “the end will not follow immediately.” The temple will crumble, there will be problems, but things will go on pretty much as before. There will still be much to do. There will be

people to help, and evil to resist, and prayers to say - just like before the Temple was destroyed. So, the temple falls, but “the end will not follow immediately”.

That must have been a hard thing to hear. It was almost impossible for anyone in Israel to imagine the destruction of the temple. What would be even harder to imagine was the destruction of the temple and the rest of the whole world *not* coming to an end right then. After all, everyone knew that the Temple was the ultimate thing, the final thing: if it went, everything else was sure to go, too.

But that was wrong. The Temple was not the ultimate thing after all, it was only one of the penultimate things, something that was next door to ultimate, maybe, but that’s all.

All of creation did not hang on it. The main thing, the one truly important and indispensable thing, is God, and what God is up to. Everything else is penultimate.

Everything else takes a back seat. Everything else can - and will - crumble to dust. Anything else can, and will, crumble to dust. The fate of creation hangs on none of them. Who God is and what God is up to - this is what abides, this is the main thing. This alone is ultimate.

It can be difficult to remember this. When the Temple actually fell, (and the world did not end) the fledgling Christian church in Jerusalem (as well as many Jewish groups) faced a huge crisis of faith.

Lots of people then simply could not separate what was most important and most valuable and most immediate *to them* from what was most important and most valuable and most immediate *to God*. For many, the Temple’s fall was devastating, and seemed to prove God false. They had confused the ultimate with the penultimate.

And something very much like that is still with us. We all have our temples, our penultimates. We all have our own ideas of what is indispensable to creation - these may be personal things, or religious things, or social things, or cultural things, or election results, things we cannot conceive being otherwise, or doing differently, or losing - things we cannot imagine that either we or the world or God could ever live without.

So, every now and then, we need to be reminded that these things are not quite ultimate.

It’s very important to be able to make this distinction - to be able to realize that our special concern, our pet project, our current passion, is not really the same thing as the kingdom of God, or the will of God. This whole business of the last things, the end of the world, all of that is here to remind us that our stuff, no matter how important it may be, our stuff is not ultimate. It will all pass away. Remember that word...penultimate.

Instead, it is who God is and what God is doing, right now among us, that is of ultimate importance. Nothing else matters nearly as much, nothing else will matter for so long.

The point is not to hang on tight to what we have. The point is to keep our eyes and hearts open, and our hands busy at what we need to be about.

Written by The Reverend James Liggett. Liggett recently retired as Rector of St. Nicholas' Episcopal Church in Midland, Texas. He is a native of Kansas and a graduate of the University of Houston and the Episcopal Divinity School. He has served parishes in Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma.

Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

© 2016 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.