

Sermon (1 of 5)
{Ezra 1:1-4 and Matthew 23:37 – 24:2}
The Wall

The two greatest events of the Old Testament was: 1) The Exodus; and 2) The Exile of 587 B.C. when the walls of the Holy City and the Temple were destroyed and the Jewish people were disbursed throughout the Babylonian Empire. During their Exile the people grieved their homeland, their customs, and their religious institutions. Psalm 137 captures the extent of their grief. “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion... For there our captors asked us for songs... ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” So they grieved the loss of their religious customs and their Temple.

But after 70 years of Exile and captivity the new emperor, Cyrus of Persia issued a degree allowing the Jewish people to return to their homeland and rebuild their future, beginning with the Temple followed by the walls of Jerusalem. It is all recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is important for us to understand that the Temple, more than anything else, was the center point of all their religious life. The Temple housed the “Holy of Holy” and the Ark of the Covenant, which together contained the living presence of the Most High.

Moreover, the rebuilding of the Temple is not simply about a building, it is a story of the relationship between God’s work and human works. And so with Cyrus’ decreed in hand the Jewish people returned home and started rebuilding their future, beginning with the Temple.

Now, fast forward approximately 500 years to the time of Jesus, and we get a completely different attitude towards the Temple. The Gospel account you just heard, and witnessed, gives us a picture of Jesus walking away from the Temple uttering words that could have gotten him killed.

He is grieving over Jerusalem, not because of the Temple (the building) but because they have lost their way. Note what he says, “See, your house is left to you, desolate.” Desolate, meaning dead; spiritually and religiously speaking, bankrupt... God was no longer there anymore. Remember now, the Temple was the center of religious life which housed the presence of God. But Jesus is saying that God is no longer there. **God has left the Building!**

Try and picture it now. Jesus is walking away from the Temple as he utters these words, and his disciples is trying to catch up with him pointing to the Temple. They have never seen anything so magnificent. Again note Jesus’ response: “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one **stone** will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

It is all in the detail. First Jesus grieves for the people of Israel. Then he makes the comment about the Temple being spiritually and religiously bankrupt. Now He refers to this magnificent building, The Temple, adorned by so many, as nothing but a heap of stones, bound for destruction. What he is saying is that nothing, temple or church, can assume that it is going to last forever. He is reminding us that the church is the people – little more! It’s a living thing, a living organism, and it **only gets to live as long as it is doing the right thing**

No doubt you have noticed the construction of the New Wall that is taking shape outside. Many people have already said to me how good it looks and how it enhances the look of the church building; picturesque even. Moreover, it sends a message to us and to onlookers that we are alive and well. Newness inspires. If the wall says anything it is that we are here to stay, at least for the next few years, and that we are serious about rebuilding our future – not unlike the ancient Hebrews.

When I came here in September 2013, I inherited, among other things, The Wall. And if I understand correctly, the Wall project had been on the Parish agenda for about ten years or more. I had some concerns about replacing the Wall (some of which I share with those whom I worked with), namely spending \$200,000.00 on a project when we may not even have a congregation here five years from now. That didn’t make sense to

me. I (We) felt we needed a vision for St. Thomas' before we proceeded with that kind of investment.

And so with a New Vision (and because of safety concerns), it was decided to proceed with building a new wall. But it took fifteen years or more for that to happen. I can tell you right now, we don't have fifteen years to rebuild this congregation; to turn this parish around and, like the ancient Hebrews, to rebuild our future. We don't even have five years. Whatever is to be done it has to be done quickly and with everyone on board.

And make no mistake, there will be other changes as well. There has been some talk about removing those back pews and developing that space to make room for other ministries that fall in line with the new mission/vision. And I am sure with a good plan that space will not detract from the look of the building but enhance it, just as the new wall did.

But when we talk about rebuilding our future, what are we really talking about; what are we called to build? We are talking about the Church which Jesus bought with his own blood; His precious church. And it will only work as long as we are doing the right thing. What is the right thing? I will have a few words to say about that in a moment, but make no mistake, when we are talking about building, or rebuilding, it starts here with the worshipping congregation.

The Sunday morning, worshipping congregation, is the prime gathering activity of Christians. My mother was a Homemaker. She had seven children, four of which were boys. I know we were a handful because by the time the end of the week rolled around she was beat – to her wits end. There were times I am sure we tested her own faith.

After Sunday morning worship she was recharged, ready to go another round. One of her favourite sayings following the service Sunday morning was, "It makes me feel some good." "Good," meaning spiritually energized; revived; rejuvenated. By the end of the week she was ready to make away with us; after church she was all hugs and smiles.

When the bells toll on a Sunday morning it is calling us to gather for prayer and worship – and for good reason. Sunday morning is all about connections, both vertically and horizontally. It is about community. It is where we learn the art of loving and where we enact the two great commandments: the love of God and the love of neighbour.

Among other things, worship functions as a means of forming us into God's people; transforming us into the way of Christ. Sunday morning worship is where real Christianity happens—make no mistake about that. The role of community is participation in God's passion for the world. "For God so loved the **world** that he gave his only begotten Son." With that understanding we are dismissed, sent out, to go into the world as witnesses to what we have experienced in worship. Worship, Sunday morning worship, is the primary activity of Christians. The building or rebuilding begins here. Everything we are, is to be poured into the rebuilding of this faith community.

One of the reasons for wanting to renovate the back of the church is to create an inviting atmosphere for morning coffee, between and after services. The rationale is that it will make for better hospitality (one of our core values), and may also provide space where people can explore their faith (Wayfinding – another core value.), and so on. To create the space for growth.

But I must share this story with you that I read just this week. It is about a young mother of two who recently lost her husband to cancer after a two year battle. She is a believer. She is a practicing Christian. She is in love with Jesus. In the midst her grief and her loss she criticizes the church.

She criticizes the church for all the trendy things they are doing to attract new members and to grow their congregations like installing new lighting and new sound systems that resembles Theater; using the latest technology to bring movies into sermons; building fancy coffee bars that resamples Starbucks, and so on. "The church doesn't need any more Starbucks," she says.

And then she goes into a lengthy discourse of all that her young husband went through during his illness -- chemo treatments, weeks in and out of the hospital, trips to emergency, not being able to see his two little children on a regular basis, bad news after bad news from the doctors, etc. – and then the day finally came when this young mother had to tell her two children that their dad wasn't going to make it.

But when he was dying she said that she didn't hear her husband talk about all the trendy things the church was doing. What he talked about is the love of Jesus, and about a sermon he heard that changed his life, and the hymns that he would sing as he fell asleep praising the Lord and praying for his family. These were the things that mattered.

Her criticism is absolutely right. All these trendy things, however necessary we feel they are, **are secondary, including the church building**. What matters most is the Worshipping Community and what we take away – Hopefully the right thing.

Regardless of what change we incur, if at the end of the day being a part of this worshipping community doesn't create in us a heart filled, overflowing, with the love of Jesus Christ, then we are subject to the same criticism from Jesus as did the people of the ancient Temple – we are “desolate;” devoid of God.

Religion is the means of ultimate Transformation. The whole purpose of worship, through the practices of Word and song and prayer is to take us to a deeper level, to make us better people; to enter into the Way of Jesus Christ, which is the way of love; the way of transformation. It is the whole concept behind Jesus' words to Nicodemus, to be “born again” (John 3). It is what Paul meant when he said, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away” (2 Cor. 5:17).

And it all begins here so that when I am dismissed to go into the world I am inspired, elated even, i.e., I am spiritually prepared to walk side by side with the grieving widow, to visit the sick in hospital, to offer my gifts as a teacher in Sunday School, to offer a cup of steamy hot coffee to the bag lady who slept outdoors all night and smells of urine, to be a healthy

presence to the person who is going through one of the darkest times in their life, to show people the love of God, because I have experienced the love of God through Community worship. Doing the right thing is what matters and it all starts here.

I would like to think that the New Wall is the start of something new for St. Thomas' church; a decree issued for the rebuilding of our future— to rise from the foundation we have to building, or rebuilding of a church that's more relevant, even extravagant.

If there is a common theme running through these two passages of scripture it is that they wanted their religion to expand, to evolve, to learn and grow; to be a spiritual home when God is actively present and on the move – and that can happen.

The biblical story of the rebuilding of the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, is a reminder to us that God is at work beyond what meets the human eye of his people. I find that reassuring because if it is of God we have nothing to fear.