

Lent 2, Year C
Luke 13:31-35
February 28, 2010

Today's lesson from St. Luke's gospel is easy to overlook, but in my view that would be a mistake, for it points us directly at the genuinely tragic dimension of human existence. Unlike Greek tragedy, which at times seems to avert its gaze just as the damage we do to ourselves becomes overpowering, this passage does not blink; we are brought face to face with our self destructive tendencies. Here is Jerusalem, the center of the world's greatest revealed religion, where in legend Abraham's was faith was tested to the utmost and found true, the site of the Temple, the dwelling place of scholars, the place where the Word of God is studied most assiduously, the home of the Chosen People. Yet it is this same Jerusalem that is so blinded by her own greatness that in the name of the One True God she ceaselessly rejects those that One True God sends to her. No matter how much she worships, how much she studies, how magnificent is her Temple, she never finally understands her true role, and because of that seeks to destroy her own God without even realizing what she is doing – indeed while imagining she is being faithful - and so brings about her own destruction over and over again.

Other people reading this passage have successfully protected themselves from its obvious meaning by imagining that it is about those people back then, not about us right now. They misunderstood scripture, we understand it rightly.

They worshipped in the wrong manner, we worship correctly. Their faith was therefore deficient, ours is complete. To take this perspective, which is often exactly what people do, is of course to misunderstand the text so completely as to justify fully its critique of the human condition, and prove beyond doubt its truth. For we must understand, for our own souls' sake, and for the sake of the redemption of the world, that Jerusalem is not simply a city, a place, it is a universal metaphor. We are Jerusalem, and not just we Christians, or we Americans; the world is Jerusalem, and all the people in it. Everywhere we look we see this passage lived out as people in the name of their highest ideals, their greatest hopes, betray those very ideals and hopes, often not suspecting that this is what they are doing.

Thomas Jefferson penned one of the greatest statements on the proper function of government and its relationship to God the world has ever seen. The most famous phrase in this most famous Declaration is this: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Eighty-seven years later Abraham Lincoln quoted part of that phrase at the dedication of a cemetery in the midst of a war that would ultimately claim 650,000 American lives, a war made inevitable largely because we were at our founding unable to see what it meant to form a country on those principles while at the same time maintaining, and justifying on biblical grounds, chattel slavery. One hundred five years after that Martin

Luther King Jr. was martyred while striving to carry on the work of calling this nation to live up to those ideals in the face of violent, and even lethal, opposition. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem."

For the sake of the proletariat and for the progress of the classless society Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution in China. As a result, some twenty million of those very proletarians died, approximately the same number as perished in the Soviet Union as that great experiment in exalting the poor and dispossessed marched on to its inevitable conclusion. While this was happening the few people who dared to speak the truth and didn't get murdered ended up in the Gulags. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem."

It is not different today. In the name of self preservation the state of Israel has instituted a way of dealing with the native Palestinians that violates some of the most basic precepts of the Hebrew Bible, and deeply bothers even those of us most sympathetic to their cause. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." In the name of Allah segments of the Islamic world have instituted campaigns designed, to all appearances, to dehumanize women, and other segments have engaged in truly terrible violence quite often against other Muslims. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem."

We could compound the examples, for they are literally limitless. In ways both great and small people become so blinded to what they are doing, so sidetracked by fears, greed and self interest, and who knows what else, that they betray the very principles and values they hold most dear and sacred in the name of those very principles and values. Whenever that happens, wherever it

happens, there is Jesus, once again calling out to his beloved city, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem."

The power of these words is not exhausted by rightly noting their character as metaphor. We must also in this passage notice the tone of voice. This is a lament, these are the words of one whose heart has been broken by love unrequited, and who yet is willing to seek reconciliation if only it were possible. Most of the time we are not willing; most of the time our houses are indeed left to us and we must therefore live out the results of our own spiritual confusion, for this is God's way. Love cannot be forced, cannot be required, it can only be offered freely, and only in freedom can it truly be accepted. When therefore we utterly misunderstand what God's love looks like, when in our confusion we imagine that love to be something else entirely, something undesirable and alien, God leaves us to ourselves until such time as we recognize the truth.

The miracle is that there are times when we do recognize the truth, there are moments when the very reconciliation Christ seeks is brought about. Such moments inevitably depend upon people at last grasping the truth that we do have this tragic dimension within us, and as a result we will, in pursuit of perfection, betray our own highest values. When we recognize that truth about ourselves, when we see in other words that we are Jerusalem, then in that moment we become open to the power of God to overcome that tragic dimension and to redeem it.

As long, for example, as I imagine that I am a perfect father, and that everything I do is for the love of my children, I will be unable to critique myself and my own behavior. In that atmosphere I will end up doing all kinds of terrible things and justifying them on the grounds that I love my children and am doing what is best for them. Only when that perspective is destroyed, only when I learn the truth about me that love is not my only motive, that sometimes anger is, sometimes exhaustion is, sometimes my own fragile need to be needed is, will I then become able to understand truly what I am doing and see wherein I have strayed from the principle of love I most treasure. Only, in other words, when I finally notice and accept the truth that I am Jerusalem will I be opened up to be truly transformed, and then I will be able to live differently.

This is of course the story of St. Paul, who in his own words saw himself as a perfect Jew until, by the grace conveyed through what God had done in Jesus Paul was able to realize that in the name of his love for God he had persecuted those who, like him, bore that same image of God upon their souls. When Paul saw that he was Jerusalem it changed him forever.

It can change us as well. For these words we heard today are very powerful. They reveal to us that tragic dimension of our own existence, that our preoccupation with our very greatness is so often what leads us into destruction as individual people, as societies, as nations. And there is grace in them as well, for they show us the first step in the long path of redemption. They show us the light in which we must understand ourselves and our own potential, they teach

us that we are Jerusalem, and in teaching us that they teach us how to critique ourselves and our own motives. It is a lesson we must never forget, and always keep learning. Without it we cannot appreciate what we have done to others when we resort to “destroying the village in order to save it”, and we cannot understand what we have done to ourselves when the term “enhanced interrogation” begins to make sense. But when we allow this lament we heard today to teach us that we are Jerusalem, then we can begin to understand ourselves in a new way, and in that moment to witness the redemption of the tragic, through the true power of God.