

Breaking God's Heart

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

A few weeks ago we were at the National Cathedral and the Dean, Sam Lloyd, preached. In the midst of his sermon he quoted Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, who said that his constant prayer is: *Lord, may my heart be broken by what breaks your heart.* This phrase has been floating around my mind since I heard that sermon. I can't get it out, so it will be part of what I say this morning.

This is an intimidating gospel. It speaks clearly of judgment. It says that to be Christian is to be in opposition to the powers that be. Now in a country in which every presidential candidate is touting his or her faith in Christ it might seem that this would not be the case. Surely in the US of A we can safely be Christian! But Luke sets this gospel in a context in which Jesus and everyone who heard him were observant Jews. There could not be a better place to be Jewish, and we know what happened to Jesus!

Being Christian does not mean that we all agree on what it means to be faithful. Being Jewish in the 1st century didn't mean that everyone agreed on what was important.

There is something about faith which is ultimately incompatible with power. I feel that every time I go into the National Cathedral. Unlike say St. John the Unfinished in Harlem, the National Cathedral works hard to appeal to power and to the powerful in Washington. I like the dean, I took a course from him at Sewanee 15 years ago. He and I both graduated from VTS. He was rector of Trinity Copley Square until becoming dean, but I have some issues with the National Cathedral. The cathedral accommodates power. I can imagine a 21st century prophet standing on the steps of the cathedral and saying about it what Jesus said about the temple. People would not be pleased.

We put much of our faith in bricks and mortar. For this morning at least, the Gospel is summarized in the prayer *Lord, may my heart be broken by what breaks your heart.* I don't see God as caring a whole lot about bricks and mortar.

This is a dangerous thing to say because of course where would you and I worship if we didn't have Christ & Holy Trinity to worship in? We need to underwrite the operation of this church to pay the staff, maintain the building, enjoy the music, educate our children and provide space for ministry. But is the physical plant the reason we're Christians or is it because we need a place to enrich our faith? If the latter then the prayer must be *Lord, may my heart be broken by what breaks your heart.*

I know what it's like to worry about the physical plant. When I was a baby priest and rector of a small church in Southern Maryland I can remember worrying about what would happen if the man who pledged the most to the church died. He gave several multiples of what anyone else gave. I feared that I would be out of a job, my family out of a place to live, and the church would close. I was not worrying about what would break God's heart; I was worrying about paying the bills.

In this way I lost sight of the gospel. Worrying about what breaks God's heart was something to be done later when the budget was balanced. We had to live, after all, in the real world. The question then becomes, what is the real world? Is it the world of pension plans, electric bills and medical insurance or is it the world in which we are focused primarily on how to be faithful?

Jesus is saying to the people in Jerusalem that the temple is a secondary thing. However he also says that standing up for the primary thing is not easy. To stand up for that which is most important is so threatening that even families will turn on each other. Nevertheless the church is called to the prayer, *Lord, may my heart be broken by what breaks your heart.*

If the most important thing is to organize our lives around fixing that which breaks God's heart then our lives will be very troubled. John gave me the time this morning to talk with you about the work of the Interfaith Housing Association. I'm glad to do so. I've been at IHA for nearly 20 years. Many people believe that I actually enjoy controversy. Some people believe that I seek it out. Nothing could be further from the truth. I hate it. But I find that sometimes I can't stop myself from taking positions that threaten other people and cause controversy.

I have said in many contexts that there is really only one god in Westport and he is a very jealous god. He is the god of property values. I have gone up against worshipers of this god in several neighborhoods and in the next year will go up against more as we begin our next supportive housing project. I do this because I truly believe that homelessness breaks God's heart and we know what to do about homelessness. It is simple, we need to provide homes.

When I was preparing for this sermon I read several articles about apocalyptic and more about the temple and its function in early Christian thought. I read for instance that Luke wrote this gospel after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and that he was cautioning the early Christians to be patient because even the destruction of the temple wasn't bringing about the last days. I found this interesting and the temptation is to avoid saying something controversial and standing here before you instead and tell you about the intellectual study of apocalyptic. You might find it interesting, you might find it boring, you might learn something, but you wouldn't see a practical application.

So instead I've taken the apocalyptic theme of the gospel and tied it to *Lord, may my heart be broken by what breaks your heart.* I believe that God's heart is broken by poverty. I believe that God's heart is broken by the finding that 25% of returning Iraqi war veterans will become homeless. Regardless of one's position on the war, this is heartbreaking. We know what to do for them but we don't have the financial will to do it. A predictor of homelessness is service in the military, particularly in the Army. That is tragic. I believe it breaks God's heart.

God's heart is also broken by the way we treat the mentally ill in our midst. We don't blame people for catching the flu, or breast cancer, or even lifestyle diseases like diabetes 2. But we do blame the mentally ill for being crazy. We don't want them near us.

IHA fought the zoning fight for 10 West End Ave., the Westport Rotary Centennial House, and it will break ground soon. We have another zoning fight ahead of us. The neighbors will probably say that they don't like the density we're bringing, that they have enough diversity in their neighborhood already or that they admire our work but that they are certain it would be more effective in some other neighborhood. I suspect that they will say this because I've heard them say it.

What would happen if you learned in January that IHA was proposing to develop 12 units of supportive housing near you? This is when the gospel gets interesting. It's easy to say that I support your work when you know or suspect that it will be elsewhere in Westport, or maybe not in Westport at all. What happens if it ends up near you? Will you be able to say, *Lord, may my heart be broken by what breaks your heart?*

Back in 1998 I was talking with an elected Westport official about Homes With Hope. This official asked me why I wanted to open supportive housing with mentally ill people living in it on Saugatuck Avenue? The fear was that all of IHA would be at risk because of this project. It was suggested that I play it safe and pass on this opportunity. Obviously I didn't play it safe and Homes With Hope opened in October 1998 — it is still there — and I challenge anyone to find it if I haven't shown it to you.

We are not talking about being reckless with our programs. We are talking about doing what we can do and doing it well to provide community to our clients and to be an asset to Westport. Following the prayer, *Lord, may my heart be broken by what breaks your heart*, doesn't have to be divisive. But it may be, at least in the short-term.

We need the people of Christ & Holy Trinity, and the other congregations, to be with us when we implement the caring of the gospel for the poor. I hope that it is crystal clear to you that the primary call of the Gospel is to end poverty. I hope that you will be generous to us not only financially, although that is crucial, but also by standing with us when we develop more housing.

Jesus is saying in today's Gospel that there are things worth standing for even in the midst of adversity. The definition of a faithful Christian is someone who will stand for these things even in the midst of controversy. It won't be easy, it may be painful, but it is a mark of faith.

Christianity in America can be trapped in the political process. As every one of the candidates for President seeks to outdo the other with his or her piety we risk having Christianity defined as a political stance necessary to achieve power. The Gospels were written to a powerless people to sustain them in times of adversity. They were never intended to be a Democratic or Republican playbook for election to President. They are about understanding the reality of judgment and the demands of a loving God towards the treatment of God's people. The bible says consistently that if you want to find God you will find him with the powerless, with the widows and orphans, with the naked, imprisoned, sick and starving. The bible never says that you will find God at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue or 10 Downing Street. This doesn't mean that elected officials can't be faithful it just means that faith is not the precondition for election and it is not an obvious byproduct of power.

Jesus stands at the Temple, or the National Cathedral, or Christ Church in Accokeek Maryland where I was rector in the early 80s or Christ & Holy Trinity where we worship today and he says that this beautiful edifice will pass away. Our faith is not in the building. The building can support our faith but it is not the occasion for it. Faith, if we pray, *Lord, may my heart be broken by what breaks your heart*, means that at times to be faithful will mean that we are called to act in ways that engender conflict.

We sometimes speak of the Old Testament as being harsh and the New Testament as being loving and forgiving. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we read a sentence as harsh as that which occurs towards the end of today's reading. *You will be hated by all because of my name.* Jesus did not give us an easy time of it. He didn't promise us that we would be wealthy, healthy and wise if we were only faithful Christians. He did say that we would never be abandoned by him if we were faithful and that this should be enough.

I read the obituary this week of the Rev. Chad Varah, a priest of the Church of England, who died at age 95. The Times obituary concludes by his saying, because of his believe in resurrection (which they misstate as reincarnation) that his 3 words of advice to everyone were, *it doesn't matter.* If we can pray with sincerity *Lord, may my heart be broken by what breaks your heart* then when and if we find ourselves hated by others we too can say, *it doesn't matter.* That is meant to be the gift of the gospel. Your future is assured. Nothing else matters.