

Sunday 33C

The Gospel passage today begins quite innocuously. The setting is Jerusalem, just a few days before Jesus's Passion. Some of Jesus's disciples are admiring the Temple and making some fairly bland comments about how beautiful it is – the kind of comments we've all made on seeing something inspiring or beautiful. Their musings are interrupted by Jesus, who drops what we might call a 'conversation killer': *All these things you are staring at now – the time will come when not one stone will be left on another: everything will be destroyed.*

Uh, Okay.

Someone breaks the awkward silence. "When will this happen, Master? How will we know it's about to happen?"

Jesus doesn't say "in about forty years' time". But if he had, he wouldn't have been wrong, since it was in 70AD that the Roman commander and future-Emperor, Titus, sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, as Jesus had predicted. Instead, Jesus does something that at first glance looks strange: he starts talking about the end of the world. It's quite the leap. I thought we were talking about the Temple? How have we suddenly moved on to the apocalypse?

This segue would not have seemed so strange to a first-century Jew. In Jewish theology, there was a profound link between the Temple and the Cosmos. This link is deeply embedded in the Scriptures, going right back to the opening chapters of Genesis, where the act of creation itself is described in liturgical terms. To the Jewish mind, the original temple was the universe itself, and Eden, the place where God walked with man, was the original Holy of Holies. Adam was the original High Priest.

Adam's sin – original sin – had spoiled the cosmic harmony; but the institutions of Temple worship and sacrifice were there to restore it. Through the Temple, God once again dwelt among men and men could offer him fitting service, just as Adam had before his tragic fall. What had been lost in the Garden of Eden was re-established through the Temple. And that then spilled over into the cosmos itself, restoring harmony and healing the broken relationship between God and his creation. The Temple, in Jewish theology, is located at the centre of the world. Just as a circle is drawn from a single originating point, so the cosmos as an ordered and humanised space originates from the Temple.

With all that in mind, it becomes easier to understand why Jesus makes the link between the destruction of the Temple and the end of the world. Without the Temple, how can there even be a world? The word cosmos comes from the Greek word for "order"; its opposite is "chaos". Without the Temple, cosmos descends into chaos. "Nation will fight against nation, kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes and famines... fearful sights and great signs from heaven."

But perhaps we should pause and ask what we, as Christians, can take from all this. After all, we don't look for the centre of the cosmos or the restoration of Eden in the Jerusalem Temple; we look for it in Christ himself. The body of Jesus is the new Temple, it's the new cosmos, it's the space in which God's new creation takes shape. When that Temple was destroyed, on Calvary, it was, in a sense, the end of the world. The old creation died and a new creation was born.

When we look at the world around us, we see the remnants of the old creation, the dying creation, the fallen creation that passed away on Calvary. On all sides, we see chaos encroaching on cosmos, on ordered and habitable space. But, if we have eyes to see, if we look with the eyes of faith, we can also see the signs of the new creation. We can see the beginnings of a new cosmos, centred on a new Temple. Just as in Jewish theology you can't have a cosmos without the Temple, so in our theology you can't have the new creation without Christ. The two are given together: Christ, the Head, together with his Body, the Church. In the Church - in its sacraments, in its saints, in its message and its merits - the new creation, the new cosmos, which is Christ himself, is already a reality among us.