

Our Gospel lesson today comes towards the end of Mark.

The setting is the Temple, just a couple of days before the crucifixion.

The disciples are rubbernecking in the Temple. After all, they're a bunch of hicks from the sticks. But now they're in the big city. Now they're in the big Temple. And they're overwhelmed by its beauty and grandeur.

And the Temple was beautiful. The Roman historian Josephus saw the Temple just a few decades after Jesus. This is the way Josephus describes it:

"Now the outward face of the temple in its front lacked nothing... It was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun's own rays. But this temple appeared... like a mountain covered with snow; for, as to those parts of it that were not gold they were exceeding white."

And Josephus goes on to describe the glory of the temple from top to bottom. He even describes the beautiful vestments worn by the priests.

So when Jesus and his disciples are in this beautiful Temple, it must have inspired the disciples with awe.

One of them says, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

So to them, Jesus' words must seem harsh and out of place.

Jesus says, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

'What?' the disciples must have thought. 'This beautiful, glorious Temple is going to be destroyed?' It must have boggled their imaginations. Such a huge, beautiful building could never be destroyed.

And yet, that's exactly what happened about 40 years after Jesus' time. The temple was destroyed by the Roman army when they laid siege to Jerusalem and annihilated the city. All of the stones in the walls that had been standing on top of the Temple Mount were knocked down into the valley below. You can see them there today. The top of the temple mount was wiped clean by the Roman army.

So Jesus' words were right on target. "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

And then immediately after our Gospel reading ends, Jesus launches into a teaching about what it means to be one of his disciples. He tells his followers what the future will mean to them. This is what they could expect as his disciples:

Wars and insurrections.  
Nation fighting nation.  
Earthquakes, famines, plagues, natural disasters.  
Arrest and persecution.  
Betrayal by those closest to you.  
Being killed.  
Being hated by all.

That's quite a list from Jesus. All these terrible things will happen. But he ends the list by saying, "But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."<sup>1</sup>

Do you hear what Jesus is saying to his disciples? You may suffer for your faith. You may be killed. But not a hair of your head will ultimately perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

That's pretty heavy duty stuff. And we see things like Jesus is talking about in the news. Wars. Destruction. Nation fighting nation. We need to look no further than horrific terrorist attacks, like the ones in Paris this past Friday. Jesus warns us that we will be faced with such things in this life.

Jesus also warns of natural disasters. And we know that these things happen in our world as well, and from time to time we have to deal with them.

But then Jesus mentions something else. Suffering and persecution. Being put to death for believing in Jesus. This is a reality we are not always quick to grasp.

It's hard for us to wrap our 21<sup>st</sup> century American minds around the reality of religious persecution, because we are incredibly blessed with religious freedom.

Now we know that Christians in the past have suffered greatly for their faith. We definitely know that 11 of the 12 Apostles were killed for their faith, and the 12th was either killed or died in exile. We know about numerous martyrs in various times and places throughout history who have died for the faith.

But what we miss in our 21st Century American culture, is that Christians today in other parts of the world still have to endure that same kind of suffering and persecution.

We're VERY insulated in our American culture from the realities our Christian brothers and sisters have to face around the world.

More Christians were put to death for their faith in the 20th century than in all previous 19 centuries combined.

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<sup>1</sup> These specific words appear in Luke's version of the story: Lk 21:18-19

Currently there are hundreds of millions Christians in the world today who are subject to overt persecution. Sometimes the persecutions of Christians by ISIS or Boko Haram make headlines.

I know we were horrified back in February when 21 Christian were beheaded by ISIS on the beach in Libya. This group has recently become known as the 21 Coptic Martyrs or the 21 Martyrs of Libya. And modern martyrs is CERTAINLY what they are. But in the big scheme of things, their martyrdom that day was just a little statistical blip. It was only a doubling of the daily average of Christian being killed because of their faith in our world.

Around the world, on average, each day, about 11 Christians die because of their faith. That's about 3,800 martyrdoms per year, a number of deaths which is hundreds more than all of those who were killed on 9/11. On average, another 26 people are subjected each day to extreme violence—beatings, abductions, rapes—just because they are Christians.<sup>2</sup> And hundreds of millions of modern Christians are subject to lesser forms of persecution.

But let's make it more personal. I was reading about a Nigerian pastor with a congregation about the same size as St. Paul's. In the past few years he has had 42 members of his congregation killed by Boko Haram. Imagine losing 42 members to death by persecution in a congregation our size. It's a shocking thing to contemplate.

And yet this pastor says it has strengthened the faith of him and his members. They see it as a fulfillment of Jesus' words, "They will put some of you to death." They believe that if these words of Jesus are coming true, then they can trust that Jesus' other promises will come true as well. And their faith is strengthened.

And in the face of hatred, in the face of killing, this pastor prays that God won't let hatred for his persecutors enter his own heart. He says that for him, hatred would make him more like Boko Haram and less like Christ. "My work is not to kill, my work is to pray," he says. "I pray that God will touch *their* hearts and convert them."<sup>3</sup>

Now I sit here in my land of plenty and my land of freedom and have a hard time even grasping what it means for people like that Nigerian pastor and his flock to live in such a situation. Because I live in such a different and religiously insulated context.

Yes, at times I might bemoan the fact that church attendance is down throughout our culture. And I might complain that our culture no longer protects Sunday morning as a special time set aside for worship.

Yes, stores are open on Sunday, and youth sports games are now scheduled on Sunday mornings. Yes, our American culture is becoming more indifferent to the Gospel.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: [www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution](http://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution)

Statistics vary widely depending upon how you define "Christian" and being killed "because of being a Christian," but these numbers, 322 killed per month, 772 being subjected to violence, seem to be based on decent methodology.

<sup>3</sup> *Relevant Magazine*, Issue 78, Nov-Dec 2015

But knowing that there are hundreds of million brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world who are suffering for the sake of the Gospel helps keep my pity party in check. While our culture might make it less convenient for us to be Christians, we must never forget that our fellow Christians in many places today are suffering terribly for the sake of Jesus.

There will be persecution, Jesus says. This is as true in the 21st century as it was in the first. But there is also a promise. "Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Jesus never promises that things will be easy.  
But Jesus does promise to be with us.

And he promises that if we persevere, he will take care of us in the end, and God will set things right.

Though suffering and pain and persecution are current realities, they will not exist forever. God promises to take care of us. God will have his way, and things will be made right.

And in the meantime, the knowledge that the future is in God's hands can free us to do God's work NOW. We don't have to be afraid of anything.

After all, what's the worst that can happen to us? Death? Even death has no power over us.

Besides, in our land of freedom, the chances of dying for our faith are slim. The bigger question is, can we LIVE for our faith.

Can we have the same passion that our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters have for the Gospel? If they're willing to die for it, can we live for it?

Can we give of our time, talent and treasure to serve God? Can we learn to make God more central in our lives?

I'm basically saying the same thing Abraham Lincoln said in his famous Gettysburg Address. He said, "It is for us the living, rather... to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion."

That's our calling. To take increased devotion from the example of these Christian martyrs, past AND present. Increased devotion to God. Increased devotion to doing God's work.

We don't have to live in fear. We can live in the knowledge of God's love and grace and power. We can joyfully share his love and grace with others.

And we can do this confidently, knowing that the future is in God's hands, and that nothing, not suffering, not difficulty, not even death itself is more powerful than God's love and God's promises.

Nothing is more powerful than God's love and God's promises.