

## *The temple where God lives forever*

Proper 28, Year C – November 17, 2019

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

*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." Luke 21:5-19*

Fifteen-year-old Theo Decker decided one day to go back and visit the classy and beloved old building in midtown Manhattan; it had been the only home he knew before his mother had died, and then his father, both so suddenly, in the past few years. The building had always felt safe and neighborly. Theo had always been a favorite of all the doormen.

*"But when I turned the corner, amidst stalled traffic and car horns, I saw from halfway down the block that the building was cicatriced with scaffolding and the windows slapped shut with official notices.*

*"I stopped, dismayed. Then – disbelieving – I walked closer and stood, appalled. The art-deco doors were gone, and – in place of the cool dim lobby, with its polished floors, its Sunburst paneling – gaped a cavern of gravel and concrete hunks and workmen in hardhats were coming out with wheelbarrows of rubble.*

*"What happened here?" I said to a dirt-ingrained guy with a hardhat ....*

*"Whaddaya mean, what happened?"*

*"I used to live here ..."*

*"Owners sold." He was shouting over jackhammers ... 'Got the last tenants out a few months ago.'" ....*

*"Feeling sick, [I walked away], right under our old living room window, or the bombed-out shell of it rather, too disturbed to look up .... the farther I walked ... the more upset I got at the loss of one of the few stable and unchanging docking-points in the world that I'd taken for granted ... I had thought that this last touchstone of the past, at least, would be where I left it .... Even the sidewalk felt like it might break under my feet ... "*<sup>1</sup>

That scene comes from Donna Tartt's 2013 novel, *The Goldfinch*. Eerily, I happened to arrive at Theo's troubling visit to his old building on the same day this past week that I began to study today's appointed gospel passage: *"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.'"*

Imagine the chill that must have rippled through those listening to Jesus. Their Hebrew names for this Temple mainly signified *the place where our God lives*. A First Temple, built here by King Solomon 1000 years before, had been leveled by the Babylonians 400 years later. This Second Temple had now been standing here for more than 500 years. Only a generation ago, King Herod the Great had impressively renovated and expanded it. And this temple would also be destroyed, this time by Roman troops, in 70 AD, as apparently prophesied by Jesus.

Many Bible scholars imagine that today's passage from Luke was written, or at least edited, after that 70 AD destruction of the Second Temple. Features of the text, including teachings of Jesus, seem to reflect and address the likely troubles and questions of an early Christian community.

*"Why are we being persecuted?"*

*"When will God save us from all of this treachery, violence and sorrow?"*

And, *"What does the end of the Temple mean for us?"*

Those early Christians came to believe that the truest dwelling place of God was no place built with human hands<sup>2</sup> but the Body of Christ – at first in the human and divine person of Jesus but now present in those who believed in and followed Jesus and gathered and served in his name.

Even as we wonder about these poignant matters, we may also be able to hear how, in today's moment, Jesus is reaching beyond any one place or time. He is arguably addressing, more universally, the impermanence of the world. At one time or another we all walk down the street that Theo Decker walked down: the old home, held sacred in the memory of the heart, now gone or desecrated by time, change or neglect. Or if not the home, the beloved old Prayer Book or hymnal, now under glass in the archives; the relationship so sincerely entered into, now shattered; the grand scientific theory that once prevailed, now debunked; the political coalition that embodied our hopes, collapsed; the church where joy and trust prevailed, rocked by scandal.

How are we humans to endure in the context of so much turmoil, fear and loss? In the case of Theo Decker, protagonist of *The Goldfinch*, he lurches through his adolescence by way of survival instincts, increasingly honed by cunning and secrets. He learns to dull his pain and connect with others by way of alcohol, drugs and the occasional shallow affair. He is schooled in the two faces of money: necessity and the diabolical. We see in Theo that the world on its own terms often pushes solutions that only worsen our troubles and fail to address our underlying restlessness and sorrows.

This same cunning and broken world was thoroughly well known to Jesus, who came to *share our human nature, to live and die as one of us*.<sup>3</sup> But Jesus seemed to both know and to show us, in the midst of it all, what will endure in the mind and heart of God. To those who heard him at the Temple and to us, he commends an intentional and rigorous faith:

*Stay grounded in God. Lots of religious people will make big promises that they won't be able to keep. Don't go running after them. The God who can carry you through is not a seasonal fad or an overnight viral meme.*

*Things may get worse than you can imagine before they get better. You may get caught up in outbreaks of blame and shame, injustice, violence. In the midst of all of it will come your moment or moments to be the light of the world. Be ready.*

*When the time comes, speak the truth in love. Do justice. Go the extra mile with your compassion.*

*And come what may, don't forget that first and foremost you belong to God. The only forever temple you can build is the temple in your own heart and life where I will abide in you and with you.*

I should probably let you know that I have not yet finished the novel, *The Goldfinch*. It may have been wise for me to know how the story ends before preaching this message. What ever happened to Theo? On the other hand, the book of my own life is also still unfinished. There are still un-lived and unread chapters in your stories as well. What will ever happen to us? How will it end?

We have all likely turned enough pages in our own stories and traversed enough trouble to have walked where Theo walked: we've seen the demolition of a beloved place or time or opportunity that we thought would last forever. Before we get to the end of the story, those very places may have become the building sites for the temple not made with human hands, the temple that will withstand whatever the world throws our way, the temple of God with us that will last forever. *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Tartt, Donna, *The Goldfinch*, Back Bay Books, 2013, pp. 427-8.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Acts 7:48 & 17:24,28, written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke. Also see Revelation 21:22

<sup>3</sup> Eucharistic Prayer A, Book of Common Prayer, p. 362.