

YEAR C, PROPER 28, November 18th, 2007

(The Feast of St. Edmund transferred)

Malachi 3:13-4:2a, 5-6; 2 Thessalonians 3:16-13; St. Luke 21: 5-19

St. Edmund's Episcopal Church

The Reverend George F. Woodward III

My one and only venture onto the theatrical stage occurred when I was a Junior in High School and some of my friends were trying out for "Oklahoma" and so I did too. "Oklahoma" is, you remember, a musical, so my acting career lasted only as long as it took me to open my mouth in try-outs!

"Everything's up to date in Kansas City. They've gone about as far as they can go.

They went and built a sky-scraper seven stories high,

About as high as a buildin' oughta grow." (You now know why I didn't get the part!)

The country bumpkin visiting Kansas City for the first time goes on to sing of the charms of leak-proof privies and indoor heating. He is amazed at what he finds in Kansas City!

Jesus' country-bumpkin disciples were similarly awestruck by Jerusalem, especially as they stand in front of the unimaginably large and impressive Temple the likes of which they have never seen before. Josephus, the chronicler of the ancient world, described the Jerusalem Temple for two pages in his history. *"The exterior of the building wanted for nothing that could astound either mind or eye,"* he wrote. *"For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that those straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes from the solar rays."*

Herod the Great had begun the third and most extravagant version of Solomon's Temple in 20 B.C., with 10,000 laborers working on the project. At completion 20,000 Temple personnel oversaw daily operations. The Jerusalem Temple was Israel's Statue of Liberty, Supreme Court and National Cathedral rolled into one, their pride and great symbol of religious and national achievement.

Jesus' disciples are mightily impressed with the Temple, and they are shocked when Jesus tells them it will be destroyed like a matchstick house in a Santa Ana driven Southern California wildfire. What a terrible thing for Jesus to have said!

We want to anchor ourselves firmly to the world. Every great culture manifests its greatness in the edifices it creates. You can today walk through Hittite rubble at Hattusus, Greek rubble at Pergamum and Roman rubble in Rome, and I have. All great religions build great shrines, and Christianity more than most because of our materialist take on the world; the Hagai Sophia in Istanbul, St. Mark's in Venice, Canterbury Cathedral in England, all witness and testify to Christian Faith. Two of the largest Cathedrals in the world are in the United States and both are Episcopalian (St. John the Divine, NYC, and the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul, DC).

Successful companies build high office buildings; advancement in income is generally matched by a move to a more prestigious home. We want to anchor our lives, nail down our successes, assert our Faith, and reassure ourselves regarding the meaning of our days. *Be careful about that,* Jesus says. Be careful about placing your trust and confidence in anything other than God, no matter how permanent and substantial these things may seem.

We base our security and well-being on the comfort and stability of things around us...in the home that is our castle, in possessions and recognition, in the health we have enjoyed. None of these things, Jesus reminds, will endure. What we really want, deep down when we're awake and alert, is to *gain our souls*, and if we are overly dazzled by the things in which we too often tend to place our confidence, we might miss our heart's best goal; we might fail to gain our souls.

There's the story of a Rector whose church had a high, white steeple. It was a beautiful steeple and towered over the surrounding town, but it was beginning to show its age and badly needed a couple of coats of paint. Being conscious of the budget, the Rector decided to do the work himself, and to save a bit more money he cut the paint with turpentine. He was up on the steeple putting on the final brush strokes when storm clouds suddenly swirled around him. There was a roar of thunder, and a voice from out of the clouds said: "*Repaint! And thin no more!*"

Misplaced confidence thins our lives, and we need, therefore, to "*repaint.*"

Jesus uses a foreign language to make His point, a language well-known to the disciples but not in much use today, called "Apocalyptic." Learning another language isn't easy. I've embarrassed myself more than once trying! I have gone to cash a traveler's check in a bank in El Salvador, where the lines are inevitable long and unwieldy, and asked where the end of the "*culo*" is, rather than asking where the end of the "*cola*" might be, thereby inadvertently and obscenely inquiring after the line's rear-end! A couple of common and perfectly acceptable terms in Castilian Spanish are, I have discovered, profoundly inappropriate throughout Latin America. I recall trying to tell someone I was embarrassed, "*Estoy embarazado,*" only to discover that this means "*I'm pregnant!*" *Verguenza*, I now know, is the Spanish word for embarrassment.

Jesus is speaking "apocalyptic," which isn't very well understood by contemporary Americans, and is often given weird interpretations. The Jehovah's Witnesses have given us at least six dates for the end of the world based on their reading of apocalyptic passages in the Bible. American evangelicals offer carte blanc endorsement for the actions of the nation of Israel based on their peculiar interpretation. At base, apocalyptic says only that terrifying events will occur for us in our private lives and in the public arena, that tragedy will strike and the unimagined unfold and that all in which we trust will come undone, "*but by endurance you will gain your souls.*"

Souls aren't something fixed. Souls aren't something we're born with and hand back to God at the grave. Souls are something to be struggled for and birthed and nurtured. If we're going to have anything to give to God, anything to pass through the pearly gates with, we will have had a hand in its birthing and creation. The soul is developed by anchoring itself in God and maturing and developing through reflection, trust and perseverance. It is about the gaining of wise souls that this parish is all about, and Jesus reminds us that the task isn't easy.

Today is the Feast of our patron saint Edmund, King of East Anglia in the 9th Century. When confronted by a horde of Danish invaders and offered the chance to keep his throne by renouncing Christianity for paganism, he refused, went to war, lost, and was martyred. There are many interesting stories about Edmund, and later about his shrine, one of the most important in Europe, but if we can only make one point about him today it would be that he made a principled stand for Christ and paid with his life. He didn't

trust in his castle or his kingdom, his comfort or possessions. He knew all was lost unless his mind and heart and life-course retained a right orientation toward God.

I've been glad to read about the student protest movement in Venezuela resisting Hugo Chavez' December 2nd referendum to undo the Venezuelan constitution and make himself president for life. Those students have a lot to lose, and may be too young to understand just how much. They don't stand much chance of preventing Hugo Chavez' emerging dictatorship. But understanding what they do, they seem also to know that they would lose their forming souls if they kept silent.

I wonder for what principles we might be willing to suffer loss? I wonder, because of our commitment to God in Christ, what conventions we might be willing to challenge, what less taken road we might travel?

Our temples can point us in the right direction, or they can distract us from deeper matters of the heart. You don't want to be going against the grain just to be contrary, but we are foolish if we don't understand that an orientation toward God will require sacrifice and a willingness to look beyond all that glitters and seems to offer anchor in this passing world. "*If for this life only we have hoped,*" says St. Paul, "*then we are of all people most to be pitied.*" This life, this world, this nation, these stones, all is transitory. Our calling is to know God, to love God, to act justly in consequence; to hope in Christ amidst all our passing joys and troubles. Only by clarity of vision, and by endurance, will we gain our souls. Amen. GFW+