

Perhaps you remember watching Notre Dame Cathedral burning on TV earlier this year. It was shocking, especially, I imagine, if you're French. Well, think about that reaction in connection to our gospel today. Jesus is at the Temple in Jerusalem. Some His fellow Jews are pointing out how beautiful the Temple is, how it "was adorned with costly stones and votive offerings." They took great pride in the building. It really was impressive. But it wasn't only the physical beauty of the Temple. The Temple was the center of religious life and identity for Jews throughout the world, even more so than Notre Dame is to the French. So, try to imagine how Jesus' words would have struck His listeners. "All that you see here – the days will come when there will not be a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down."

There isn't a similarly prominent religious building in America, but what if the 9/11 suicide bombers had been able to fly that last plane into the White House or had collapsed the dome of the Capitol? The British Army burned down the White House during the War of 1812,

but it was new at the time and did not yet have much symbolic weight. Or for us Catholics, what if someone bombed St. Peter's in Rome and brought the whole building down? Not even any of those events can equal the destruction of the Temple for a Jew at the time of Jesus.

This is November, the last month in the Church's year, when the readings at mass focus on the End Times. There is a mixture of Jesus' words in the gospel of the events surrounding the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 and the Second Coming. But there's a clear apocalyptic theme. How will it all end? How are we to act when it does?

Revelation tells us it won't end with worldly triumph. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it very starkly (like Jesus' own words in the Gospel today). "Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the 'mystery of iniquity' in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of

apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is . . .

Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in the place of God. . . The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil." (CCC 675,677) Will this happen centuries from now, tomorrow? I don't know, but Jesus' teaching is the same for His Disciples in the first century under Roman persecution, His Disciples of the 21st century facing attack, and His Disciples at the end of time, whenever that might be.

So, what are we to do? Let's begin with what we should NOT do. At the Temple Jesus is telling His Disciples, don't get stuck in the exteriors of religion. Yes, the Temple is beautiful. And that honors God and is good, but the Temple has been destroyed before. It will be destroyed again. It's not itself the faith in God you need.

Think about the beautiful things in our own faith. There are beautiful churches, like Notre Dame. But they aren't the center of our

faith. In fact, before it burnt down Notre Dame was usually almost empty during masses there. Exterior things may be aids to faith, but they are not themselves the communion and relationship with Jesus, which is what He cares about.

I think we can be like those followers of Jesus in the Gospel today. We can be caught up in the beautiful things of the Catholic faith, music, liturgy, venerable institutions, ancestral customs, service organizations for the poor – all wonderful. But what if the outer things were all taken away? What would be left of the faith inside each of our souls? What would each of us do if our churches were taken away or destroyed? (That's happening in China these days.) What if our schools and hospitals were closed --things we're justly proud of in our long history in this society? How much faith would survive inside us? That's why we need to keep our focus tightly on Jesus.

Jesus goes on to tell us, "They will seize and persecute you, they will . . . have you led before kings and governors . . . You will be hated

by all because of my name, but not a hair on your head will be destroyed. By your perseverance you will secure your lives.”

Perseverance: that’s what we need when buildings fall, bombs go off, numbers shrink, shame and taunts are sent our way. Perseverance isn’t a flashy virtue. It may seem passive, not very heroic. But sometimes it takes all our courage and faith just to persevere and stand where God puts us, out of faith that He has put us there, whether that is in a particular marriage, family, country, or historical time period.

Whether we’re close to the Apocalypse I don’t know (Christians have a perfect record of getting that prediction wrong). But I do believe we’re living through an apocalypse. “Apocalypse” means “unveiling,” or “revealing.” These are troubled times in the Church, the culture, politics. Events of this time are going to test and reveal, unveil, for each of us how deep our own faith in Jesus is.

Today Jesus is asking us for perseverance in the faith – to stand in our place when it feels like some of our temples are falling. In such

circumstances Jesus has told us what to do – keep our eyes on Him. Trust in Him. That’s good news for us because we can do that no matter what our circumstances are. Despite any scandals, or the loss of influence of the Church, or understanding of her by society – the important thing is our relationship with Jesus. And that relationship doesn’t need beautiful buildings – as good as those are. We must not base our faith on human beings or the exteriors of our religion, but in the interior communion with Jesus in our souls. That’s why I preach so much on personal prayer time and opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit.

So, this gospel is a warning. If that relationship with Jesus is not real enough and strong enough right now for us to persevere under such afflictions, then we each need to turn now to Jesus with renewed fervor. Because, if we do, He’s assured us, no matter how difficult things get, not a hair on our heads will be lost.