

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

In our Gospel, Jesus' time of walking about on earth with His disciples in tow is about to come to an end. Jesus is in Jerusalem. He had made His humble yet kingly entry into Jerusalem, "*mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden*" (Matt. 21:5). He had cleansed the temple; He taught there; He was confronted by those that wanted Him out of the way; He warned His disciples.

And exiting out of the temple, the disciples were taken by the magnificence of that structure. "*Look, Teacher,*" they exclaimed, "*what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!*" It was another teaching moment for Jesus, this time to teach about the end of all things.

This temple is going to be destroyed, Jesus told His disciples. "*There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.*" How shocking that must have been, to think of the temple of the Lord being destroyed, but they had had a hint earlier in Jesus' ministry. "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,*" Jesus had said (John 2:19). In fact, Jesus wasn't talking about the Jerusalem structure at all, as His disciples would later figure out, but rather "*the temple of his body*" (v. 21). They would only come to realize that when Jesus "*was raised from the dead.*" Then they remembered His words, and believed both "*the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken*" (v. 22).

When will these things take place, they wanted to know, and how will we be able to recognize them? Jesus doesn't answer them, not really. We know now that the temple was utterly destroyed in A.D. 70, but Jesus didn't tell them what they wanted to know.

Jesus told them some rather generic "signs" — "*wars and rumors of wars,*" "*nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.*" "*But the end is not yet,*" He said — let the hearer understand! "*There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.*" "*These are but the beginning of the birth pains.*"

Exactly! These signs don't nail down the time of the end of the age. They are commonplace. Wars, for example. "Has the world ever been at peace?" a New York Times article asked in 2003, shortly after the U.S. took up arms against Iraq. "Of the past 3,400 years, humans have been entirely at peace for 268 of them, or just 8 percent of recorded history" (Chris Hedges, "What Every Person Should Know About War," July 6, 2003, New York Times).

Around the world, earthquakes, famines, and other natural disasters are even more common. They don't help specify the time, either, though admittedly, many have claimed to decipher the messages hidden in Scripture that unlock the mystery

of the end. But in fact, “*concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*” (Mark 13:32).

What, then, is the purpose of this dialogue? Why does Mark include it in the Gospel? His purpose was to build up the disciples for what lay ahead of them as they went forth after Jesus’ resurrection with the Good News of salvation in Jesus’ name — for it would not be easy.

No, the Christian path would not be an easy one for Jesus’ disciples. They were going to be delivered “*over to councils*”; they were going to be beaten “*in synagogues*”; they were going to be hauled up “*before governors and kings*” because of Jesus.

That is the way it was for Jesus’ disciples back then — arrested, beaten, stoned. But they had an opportunity “*to bear witness before them*” of Jesus.

You know that their great example and their powerful proclamation won the day in the Roman Empire. Christianity spread throughout the world. “*The gospel [has been and continues to be] proclaimed to all nations.*”

For many years, you and I have been the beneficiaries of their success. We have lived and moved and had our being (Acts 17:28) in a world where Christianity was dominant, respected, unchallenged. That is so no longer.

You know that I have written often about the many challenges to the Christian faith in the past 10 years or so — the government encroaching increasingly on the domain of the church, the government disfavoring the church and Christians. Year after year, the constant barrage of religious liberty cases before the Supreme Court bears witness that we are living in perilous times.

But what we are enduring is “small potatoes” compared to what the faithful Christians in Finland are enduring for speaking the unchanging truth of God’s word. I attended yesterday morning a presentation by Bishop Juhana Pohjola about the state of religious liberty in Finland. The General Prosecutor in Finland has charged the Bishop and a Minister of Parliament with hate speech, inciting violence against a people, and committing a crime against humanity, all because of a pamphlet that they published on the church’s website that teaches that “homosexual relations are against the will of God, and marriage is intended only between a man and a woman” — as the Bible teaches. They called homosexual activity “sinful” — which is what got them in hot water with the law. Calling sin a sin is now hate speech in Finland (Mathew Block, “Finnish Bishop Elect charged over historic Christian teachings on human sexuality,” April 30, 2021, ilc-online.org). In the words of our own Supreme Court, it causes “dignitary harm.”

It should not be surprising. Jesus said, “*you will be hated by all for my name’s sake.*” True Christians like Bishop Pohjola are hated by the world, but this is how that hatred is being manifested — by blasphemously accusing God Himself and His faithful Church of hate.

But calling sin sin is not hateful at all, and letting sinners wallow in their sin is not loving. Dr. Räsänen has it exactly right when she says that “a failure to recognize sin as sin undermines the very need for a Saviour.” And giving in to their government’s strong arm tactics would be tantamount to denying Christ, for Christ came to deal with our sin, as St. Paul says: “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15).

This bishop and this minister of parliament are hated by their government, while they remain patriotic. Yesterday, Bishop Pohjola praised his country amidst his criticism. It is worth fighting for; he is not going to flee. He may face jail time and fines, but he will not keep silent; he will not deny Christ; he will not bend the knee to this prosecutor. Christ is God, and she is not. Christ came; Christ died; Christ rose again from the dead; she did not. Christ is the one who promises: “*the one who endures to the end will be saved*”; she cannot.

No doubt these faithful Lutherans, this bishop and this minister of parliament, are fervent in prayer now, as the psalmist confidently prayed before them: “*Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free. The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes*” (Ps. 118: 5-9). Oh, this psalm and others fill us with so much comfort, so many promises, in the midst of such struggles. “*The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation*” (v. 14). “*I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD*” (v. 17).

We are not to this point in our country yet, but we may not be far off. The radical LGBT activists and others who look to the Nordic countries like Finland as models for the U.S. would love to silence the church here, too. God forbid! Nevertheless, it is past time for us to prepare for similar persecution by our own government. May we do so with the same kind of apostolic courage as these two Lutheran confessors: “*We must obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29). May we do so with the same unflinching confidence in our Lord. “*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever*” (Ps. 118:1)! Lord, grant that we may endure in Christ, as His steadfast love endures in us!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.