

33rd Sunday of the Year, Year C

How wonderful was the temple that people were speaking about at the beginning of today's Gospel! We might even say it was their pride and joy. Centuries earlier, the first temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. After the people's captivity ended, they returned to Jerusalem and soon built a second temple. Even though it was not as majestic as the first, at the time of Jesus King Herod had set about more than doubling the size of the Temple Mount, allowing people to gather in large colonnades or porches. Work on the outer courts and decorations continued throughout Jesus' lifetime and on up to about the year 64. The Jewish people considered this temple to be a microcosm of the entire world, the meeting point of the divine and human realms, and yet—and yet—it was all destroyed by the Romans only six or seven years later. There could hardly be a more poignant example in religious history of how fragile and impermanent everything is: ecclesial and civil leaders come and go; houses built to last for years fall into the ocean after the onslaught of hurricanes like Nicole down in Florida just a few days ago; quiet rural scenes give way to giant malls, as can be seen by comparing a photo of Tysons Corner in 1950, when there was just a filling station at a nondescript crossroads, now replaced by mammoth stores and parking garages—not to mention that the people we love, our relatives and friends, all die, as will we ourselves. Jesus' words in the Gospel about nation rising against nation make us think of Russia and Ukraine today, his talk of famines are being replicated in our own time in countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, where twenty million people are struggling to find enough food just to stay alive, and his warning about plagues cannot but remind us of the ravages of Covid.

Clearly there is no lasting temple, whether in Jerusalem or any other city, no permanent basilica or cathedral. The only temple that truly lasts is the risen Jesus himself, who actually spoke of himself as such: “Destroy this temple and in three

days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:10). Our only possible conclusion is that God’s true temple is present wherever any of us put on the mind of Christ Jesus, reaching out with healing hands to those who feel that their whole world is falling apart, where unstable lives are at least momentarily steadied, where people follow the prophet Micah’s teaching to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (Mic 6:8).

There are, of course, degrees of such Christlike behavior, so we may hope to have something of it ourselves, but occasionally it shines out with special radiance. As a memorable example, let me recount something I experienced last weekend when giving some talks to a group of Benedictine oblates in south Texas. Our final meal together was Saturday night, a tasty but not especially elegant dinner prepared by a husband and wife who had donated all their time and food to the eighty or so people at this festive meal. Good enough, one might say. But afterwards the Benedictine sister in charge of the whole program asked the couple to talk to the whole assembly. The man started by simply and humbly saying that he and his wife had decided twenty years ago to devote their entire lives to caring for people who were, as we say, “down and out.” They did this purely out of their love of Jesus and their desire to model their lives on his teaching as best they could in their own circumstances: providing food and other necessities to those who were homeless, penniless, not even noticed by most of us. As the man continued talking, he became so filled with the feeling of his love of Jesus that his voice broke and he could hardly continue speaking until his wife put her hand on his shoulder and steadied him both physically and emotionally. That scene alone is what I most remember of the weekend, something that made it infinitely worthwhile to make that lengthy roundtrip flight to a tiny, remote monastery nearly two thousand miles from here.

I have no doubt that that couple have faced obstacles of one sort or another, may at times have wondered if their commitment to the poor was sustainable, but their conviction that Jesus is truly God's temple is what keeps them faithful. They are living examples of living that final line of today's Gospel: "By your perseverance you will secure your lives."

There's another part of our Gospel reading that is again wonderfully illustrated in the life of another person. Jesus promises that in times of testing we may count on him to give us the right words, words that arise not out of human contrivance but out of the power of Jesus' Spirit. The context in the Gospel is specifically persecution, but the teaching surely applies to any great difficulty or danger. I suppose most of us have at least heard of the Dorsey Brothers, who formed an orchestra in the 1930s, but another man who happened to have the same last name was at least as significant in the realm of American music. Thomas Dorsey was born in a Black community in rural Georgia late in the 19th century and later moved to Chicago where he began playing piano in churches as well as clubs and theatres, but then devoted his artistry exclusively to the church. In August of 1932 he went to St. Louis as the featured soloist at a large revival meeting, leaving his pregnant wife back home in Chicago. After the first night of the revival he got a telegram that contained only four words: "Your wife just died." Rushing back to Chicago, he learned that his wife had died in childbirth, and the very next day his newborn son died too. Burying his wife and child in the same casket, Dorsey withdrew in sorrow and agony from family and friends, refusing to compose or play any music for many months. Still in despair, one night he sat in front of a piano and suddenly felt a feeling of peace wash over him, while in his head he heard a melody that he had never heard before. After playing it on the piano, that night he composed the following words while in the midst of his suffering, a Gospel song that is one of the best-loved ever written:

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand;
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light;
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.

Thomas Dorsey rightly never took credit for the melody or the lyrics, for they were given him by the Lord, the same Lord that promises that we, too, need never remain in despair or be at a loss for words when faced with some grievous obstacle. May our sharing in the Eucharist this morning strengthen our own faith, our perseverance, our love.