

Sermon preached by the Reverend William J. Eakins
St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
November 18, 2018
Proper 28, Year B

[Daniel 12:1-3](#)

[Psalm 16](#)

[Hebrews 10:11-14 \(15-18\) 19-25](#)

[Mark 13:1-8](#)

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" It was a perfectly natural and understandable comment. As enlarged and refurbished by Herod the Great, the Jerusalem Temple was an architectural wonder, a structure of jaw-dropping beauty and immense size. Herod intended it to impress both his Jewish subjects and foreign visitors with the King's power and wealth.

Take for example, some of the temple's dimensions: a colossal platform thirty feet high, the area of 22 football fields, built of enormous limestone blocks weighing many thousands of pounds. It's still there today, the most prominent feature of Jerusalem's Old City. Atop this platform there was a huge courtyard surrounded by a double colonnade of marble pillars 40 feet high and towering up in the center of the courtyard and the sanctuary itself built of white stone with a façade and roof adorned with pure gold.

No wonder folks like Jesus' disciples were awe-struck. But Jesus is not. "Do you see these great buildings?" Jesus asks. "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." And indeed that is exactly what happened to Herod's temple some 40 years later. In 70 AD the Romans set fire to the temple, looted its gold, pulled down as many of its colossal stones as they could and left the temple a desolate ruin.

Why was Jesus not impressed with the temple's magnificence? The reason is not that Jesus knew the temple was soon to be destroyed. The reason has to do with Jesus' values, his different way of seeing things. In the Gospel passage that we heard last week, Jesus saw rich people throwing large sums into the temple treasury, and a poor widow putting in two pennies. Jesus observed that the poor widow's gift was worth more than the gift of the rich because she gave all that she had. Likewise, when Jesus looks at the large stones and buildings of the temple, he sees not magnificence but moral failure, the discrepancy between the temple's grandiosity and the low qualities of the worship taking place within its walls.

A few days earlier, Jesus had already made dramatically clear his criticism of the religious establishment in charge of the temple. He has charged into that vast colonnaded courtyard and driven out the moneychangers involved with collection of the temple tax and overturned the booths of those selling sacrificial doves. And he has condemned the scribes and the chief priests in the harshest of terms: "[God's] house shall be a house of prayer for all nations: But you have made it a den of robbers." So what good is the temple's magnificence if it is not fulfilling its God-given purpose?

Last Sunday about 80 of St. John's neighbors came to this church at the end of a West Hartford house tour sponsored by the Noah Webster House/West Hartford Historical Society. Our guests were much taken with the beauty of our buildings. As they sat in these pews listening to a talk about the history of St. John's and the architecture of our worship space, they were impressed by the noble proportions of our sanctuary, and such things the fine quality of the wood and stone carvings and the size and number of the organ pipes. It was gratifying to hear the visitors' appreciative comments. But our visitors were also curious about how we worship in this space, about what we believe, and whether we have programs for young people.

If we take to heart Jesus' words in today's Gospel we know that what really matters to God is not the beauty and size of St. John's church buildings but the quality of what happens in and through these buildings. God is not as impressed with architecture as we are. Now don't get me wrong. I do think that church buildings are important,

and I do think that handsome structures like St. John's are valuable assets that should be appreciated and maintained. But church buildings are not ends in themselves. They are built to the glory of God. They are symbols of God's presence, power and love, and they should inspire God's people to exemplary lives and Godly mission. If Christ were to walk through these doors and visit us this morning, Christ would not be looking at our stained glass windows, our massive organ, our elegant stonework and woodcarving. Christ would be looking at us and measuring the quality of our life together, the strength of our love for one another, the generosity of our giving, the ways in which we are carrying out God's mission of justice, peace, and reconciliation in this neighborhood and in a needy world.

This morning's Gospel also points to what God considers important in our national life. What makes this nation great? Is it the extent of our territory stretching "from sea to shining sea?" Is it the size of our population? Is it the number of our troops, our warships and our planes? Is greatness the size of our economy, the strength of the Dow and the S&P 500? The success of our athletes? The answer of Jesus and the answer of the Bible to these questions is a resounding 'no.' God has a different standard of greatness than the one to which we human beings are typically drawn. God looks for greatness in the quality of a nation's life together, how we care for one another. The reason for Jesus' condemnation of the temple authorities was more than a religious criticism: it was a moral and a social one. The injustice done to temple worshippers in the form of exorbitant fees for the payment of the temple tax and the purchase of sacrificial animals was a symptom of the injustice in the nation as a whole - a wealthy elite lording it over the poor, unconcerned and uncompassionate for those who were struggling just to get by.

If Jesus were to look at our life together in the United States today, what might he say? Surely he would have something critical to say about the rancorous division that has found its way into our national life and the incivility of our public discourse. What would Jesus say about the growing disparity between rich and poor, the plight of children and youth growing up in poverty, the high rate of divorce and drug use? Jesus would look at us with God's values of justice and compassion, seeing every human being as important and beloved, and Jesus would see much in America that needs changing.

Finally, this morning's Gospel also serves as a guide for taking stock of our personal life. God is not impressed with the size of our bank account, the number of academic degrees we have or the title on the door where we work. God cares about quality not quantity. God looks at our hearts to see who and what we put first, who is at the center of our personal universe. Is it God and our neighbor or is it really just us? By God's standard there are paupers who are kings and kings who are paupers, tycoons who are failures and failures who are heroes. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.