

"Was It Worth It?"

Recently I've been backing away from things that at one time brought me great joy and no longer do. I've been handing off things from my overfilled plate, because I don't have the strength and bandwidth to continue the pace I've been keeping over the past several months.

I was talking to a trusted friend about my decision to resign as Chaplain from the Legion. It was a very difficult decision to make, and one that I prayed on, agonized over, prayed some more and finally decided it was time. I've dedicated huge swaths of time over the course of my adult life to the Royal Canadian Legion. And like all agencies, including the Church, the Legion has changed in the past couple of decades, certainly in the past few years.

When I talked to my friend about the struggle I was having with making the decision he asked me one question. "Was it worth it?" He must have seen the confused look on my face because he continued. All the time you invest of yourself in the Legion, all the time you spend writing liturgies and conducting services on behalf of the Legion – was it worth it?

At one time I'd have answered in the affirmative even before the question was fully asked. This time, however, it took me several minutes until I admitted, through tears, that it no longer was.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus has been hanging out with some of his harshest critics who have been grilling him about his authority, about paying taxes, about the resurrection, and he has answered with parables, the latest of which is right before where today's reading starts. It's the Widow's offering and has often been used to illustrate being a cheerful giver. It's often used during financial campaigns and traditionally includes the slogan "For God loves a cheerful giver".

Except, that's not what the story of the widow is about. And that will be left for another day.

Today's Gospel begins:

"When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.' (Luke 21.5-6, NRSV)

As we read this more than 2,000 years later, we know that Jesus is referring to the temple of his body - that he is speaking of his death and resurrection. This group of pharisees and scribes as well as some of his followers would not have heard this before and, rightly, have taken him literally.

The temple in question had been under construction for forty-six years. It was massive - The Temple Mount was originally intended to be 1,600 feet (490 m) wide by 900 feet (270 m) broad by 9 stories high, with walls up to 16 feet (4.9 m) thick, but had never been finished. To complete it, a trench was dug around the mountain, and huge stone "bricks" were laid. Some of these weighed well over 100 tons, the largest measuring 44.6 by 11 by 16.5 feet (13.6 m × 3.4 m × 5.0 m) and weighing approximately 567-628 tons. (brittanica.com)

This edifice was huge, a testament to Herod the Great, who began construction in 20 BCE. Jesus is sitting with a small crowd of the curious and the weary, who are trying to figure out how this massive structure will fall, when all the stones will be thrown down.

By comparison the Saddledome in Calgary, seats just under 20,000 people and its field size is 474,000 square feet. The Temple was estimated at 1,440,000 feet or three times the size of the Saddledome. Just for fun, the average NHL size hockey surface is 17,000 feet, which means the Temple would hold, just in area alone, 84.7 hockey arena ice surfaces.

We're gonna need a bigger Zamboni (for that ice surface!)

The faithful in the crowd who have heard Jesus now do a very natural thing; they ask for a sign to know when this is about to take place. Just as one who has lived on the land can read the sky and know the weather about to happen, those who heard Jesus' apocalyptic words, wanted to be prepared.

Jesus warns the crowd about being taken astray. He reminds them that there are many false prophets in the world. Many people move about, saying to anyone who would hear, that they are the Messiah.

They are told:

'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.'

Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. (Luke 21.9-11, NRSV)

If we pause here for just a moment, think of what has been happening in Ukraine. Russian troops rolled into Kherson on 22 March 2022. On 9 November these troops were ordered to withdraw and Ukrainian forces entered the city the following day.

I wonder how many residents of Ukraine and indeed the Eastern European Plain area, feel about the retaking of Kherson?

In the last two years we have lived through a global pandemic. Our way of existing in the world continues to change and evolve. Now, along with re-usable bags in my car, I carry at least one mask. In most coat pockets I have a mask.

When we gathered at the Cenotaph on Friday it was the first time in three years that we were able to do so. The last two years, Remembrance Day was a much smaller affair held at the older part of St. Margaret's Cemetery. To be part of the parade again was moving.

Being able to return to Rocky Mountain Village this year, after a two year absence was wonderful. The saddest part was looking out into the crowd and not seeing many residents who I'd seen last in 2020.

Jesus is telling those around him that they will need to change from what they now know. That they will need to be careful because there will be great fear and misrepresentation.

They will fear for their very lives and those of their families.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." (Luke 21.9)
We hear of Russian retreats and Ukrainian advancements, reclaiming lands that had been annexed illegally. We rejoice and we fear simultaneously, because we cannot foresee what will occur next...

"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues." (Luke 21.10)
Our world is simultaneously on fire and in severe drought. Globally we produce enough food to feed the world and yet more than one third of the inhabitants of this little blue marble are malnourished. How can that be so?

"...there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven" (Luke 21.11)
Portents or signs usually forecasting disaster and destruction have been forecast for millenia. Some still hold that the beginning of the end of the Church was the ordination of women. Or inclusion of our 2SLGBTQ+ family. Or marriage equality. We watch with great uncertainty the midterm elections happening in America. Depending on which news venue you follow it is touted as the great awakening, the great decline or the rebirth of fake news.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name." (Luke 21.12) We are fortunate to live in a part of the world where we will not be arrested or persecuted because we are followers of Jesus. We are free to worship in the language of our choice, in the denomination of our choice. We take much for granted in the ease of our faith, compared to other parts of the world and earlier centuries in time.

"This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your mind not to prepare your defense in advance." (Luke 21.14) When we began the conversation regarding shared ministry, three plus years ago, some people had their minds made up one way or another. Some of us have changed our minds, some have strengthened their opinions.

There are more changes to come, some of which I anticipate will be heralded and others will be met with some degree of resistance. And all of that is good and necessary. It's important to share opinions with people who disagree with you because it helps to strengthen your opinion; to provide you with another opinion that may cause you to think in a different way; or to show you a completely different point of view that may change yours. Stagnation is never good. Challenge and discourse is healthy and necessary.

"...for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." (Luke 21.15) We need not fear what we say for Christ is with us always. You will notice over the next couple of weeks that things will look different in the Office, in the Parish Hall and possibly even in the Sanctuary. Everyone will have the opportunity to express their opinions and I'm hoping many of you will volunteer to help with the tasks that will need to be undertaken as we walk together in faith and in Ecumenical Shared Ministry.

"You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death". (Luke 21.16) Yesterday I gathered with a large group of younger people to remember a young man who gave so much of himself. He was a rock star in setting up for David Barrett's funeral. Logan arrived, arms laden with things and asked me where I wanted them. I had no idea, and told him so, and he set them down. Then he brought more things in and began to sort and place them. In the end the display was perfect. Yesterday there was a small display put together of things with which Logan is remembered. And it was perfect.

"You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." (Luke 21.17-19) Life is difficult and some days that difficulty feels insurmountable. In setting up the office I'm moving things from my home and making time to tidy up and reset my flat is proving to be illusive. I have such great plans for the bulletin boards in the Parish Hall and need only a few hours and the energy to do them...

In my overwhelming fatigue and brain fog I know that I have only twelve days until I am away for two weeks of retreat. Time spent in rest, reflection, hiking, meandering, wonder and wandering. Time spent not working and preparing to return refreshed and hopefully rejuvenated to push through the hectic time of Advent/Christmas/Epiphany and then into Annual General Meeting "season" and other wonderful administrative and governance details.

And as I prepare to be away for those fourteen days, I feel the need to ensure my desk is clean, both in the office and at home. When I return I will be keeping office hours three days a week, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, unless something pressing arises such as a funeral.

Jesus challenged his followers that life was going to get worse before it got better. Thankfully we are not foreseeing that kind of change. There will be challenges in the days, weeks and months to come as we rediscover what it is to be Church in this often upside down apocalyptic world.

The pre-COVID world is over. The COVID world is coming to an end and we are learning to live in a post-COVID or endemic world. We may yearn for things as they once were, yet if we spend too much time focussing on the rear view mirror we will miss the incredible sites before us.

And so, as we boldly go into a world that is, at times, unrecognisable, I pray for your guidance, your prayers, your patience and your gumption. The work is not over. In some ways, it is beginning or, beginning again..beginning anew.

And so I ask you, as Jesus may have asked his followers in those days following his resurrection... 'Was it worth it?"

Let the Church say, AMEN.

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan
Incumbent Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Christ Church Anglican & Fernie Knox United
Regional Dean, East Kootenay Region
Luke 21.5-19
Sermon for 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
13 November 2022, Fernie, British Columbia