

The Temple Mount
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St. Thomas's Anglican Church, Toronto
Luke 21.5-19

✠ In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Just over six months ago, I visited the Temple Mount, where I prayed at the Western Wall. (I said Morning Prayer using the Common Prayer app of the Prayer Book Society of Canada, in fact.) Later, my fellow Christian pilgrims and I stood on the steps that centuries of Jewish pilgrims had used to access the temple as they ascended from the valley below. Limited archaeological evidence about the Temple Mount exists, since the excavation of a site so sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims would be viewed as sacrilege by many. Indeed, entrance to parts of the Temple Mount is forbidden because of the belief amongst some that the Presence of God still dwells in the Holy of Holies, the exact location of which is unknown.

The wall itself was a feat of ancient engineering incredible in its sophistication. Made of huge stones, it had originally extended both far below where we were standing, gazing at the southeast corner of the Second Temple, and far above the top of the present-day ruin. And the temple, as we hear in today's Gospel, was magnificent. So it must have been shocking, this proclamation from Jesus, for those who worshiped there: "When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus 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.'" All they had worked for, all that they valued, for naught. They must have wondered whether it had been worth the effort.

At face value, the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. certainly seems to have fulfilled the apocalyptic statement by Jesus that, "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another." And yet, even two thousand years after Jesus' prediction, the Temple Mount is still a holy site where Jews, Christians, and Muslims gather to pray every day and every hour of the year. Despite false teachers, false prophets, and false messiahs, we have not yet seen every stone pulled down. Despite religious persecution throughout the world, dreadful portents, and great signs from heaven, we haven't yet come to the end. Despite wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, and plagues, we still have reason for resurrection hope.

And that is great news for us here at St. Thomas's today. We, too, are called to gather here, in this temple on Huron Street, to remember the goodness of God, and to give thanks. We are allowed to take delight, as Jesus' disciples did, in the beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God that we see here, in the lovely carved lines of the reredos and the splendid painting of triptych above the Lady Altar. And we are invited to continue to care for and preserve them. We are called to continue laying brick upon brick, stone upon stone, repairing and replacing as needed, to make this place more accessible to all and sundry, to the hale and the frail, to those in wheelchairs and those pushing strollers.

The fact remains that someday, perhaps sooner than any of us would want, our efforts might also come to naught, our building come tumbling down, our treasures lost. The trappings of this church

are fragile, earthly things. Yet whether any trace of St. Thomas's, Huron Street, remains in another two thousand years is quite beside the point. For the question isn't about some future day when no stone will be left upon another, but about what will we do in our own day to glorify God, come what may.

The Temple Mount is a shadow of its former self. But it still draws people from all over the world. St. Thomas's is only now beginning to emerge into a new era where rebuilding our community is possible. Whatever comes next, for as long as we are here, we have the responsibility to be as invested in the church's mission as humanly possible, knowing that God will prosper our handiwork, even when the future is uncertain.

The very uncertainty of life is an opportunity to practice an active faith, sowing seeds and living abundantly *as though* these things will last, in the knowledge that the doing is as important as the result, and is, ultimately, all that we can control. Being stewards of this church won't guarantee that it will last two thousand years, but it might at least mean that God is glorified and the people are edified, and that pilgrims will continue to find their way to this holy place. Investing in the church gives purpose and meaning, and the hope that we will have offered our best when the last day comes. Investing in the church tempers the uncertainty of this life with the promise of God the eternal Rock, in Jesus Christ, the cornerstone on which this holy temple is continually being built.

Ultimately, this is why people continue to worship at the Temple Mount: Not for its buildings that have long since fallen to ruin, but because the place has been sanctified, made holy. The work of the people, the years of devotion, the care they took, the presence of God. It has all come together to make a place that is supremely, divinely holy, and that calls pilgrims toward the sacred site and home of three faiths.

Some people like to say that church buildings aren't missional, that they are a drain on the *real* ministry of the church, and that one can worship just as well in a storefront or an open-air park. My response is, "Well, yes. But also no." The glory that is born in the interplay of liturgy and music, organ and congregation and choir, in the mix of sunlight and stained glass that sends shafts of color piercing the room through clouds of incense—these things are not mere add-ons to our worship, but evidence of the living Christ among us. Buildings *matter* because *matter* matters. Our building can help us transcend the worries and uncertainties of this life as we find our hearts lifted heavenward and our eyes fixed on the glories to come. Buildings *matter* because they are the place from which we undertake our ministry in the world. Without them, we cannot rent rooms to the play school, where children are nurtured, or hold Sunday school in the undercroft. The making and serving of meals for the Friday Food Ministry requires a kitchen and a hall. It is the gathering point for our efforts in support of refugees. Buildings *matter* because they are our commitment to the beauty in life, and the need to bring our best to all our endeavours.

That's where stewardship comes in. Stewardship isn't just about giving money to the church (though it most certainly includes that). Nor is it about historic preservation and capital improvement. Stewardship encompasses all the time, talent, and treasure we commit to God. When we choose to spend our time, talent, and treasure by investing it in a community grounded in God, that grounds

us both in the here and now and in the hereafter, when our bodies are in the ground. So let's look at these three aspects of time, talent, and treasure in turn.

The more time we give to God at St. Thomas's, the less uncertain will our future be, because it takes an investment of time to come up with new ways of being together, studying together, praying together.

The more talent we give to God at St. Thomas's, the less uncertain will our future be, because the more pleasant it will be to be here. Our Friar's Guild is currently defunct—as I understand it, this was the group of parishioners who took charge of our social life apart from routine coffee hours. We need to learn how to party again, how to have fun, how to rejoice in each other's company. And doing so requires people who are good at logistics and planning. It requires creative and imaginative people with a can-do attitude. It requires making an effort to revive St. Thomas's as a centre of community activity, some of which will be intentionally focused on Christian formation and learning, but others that will be just an excuse to hang out with each other.

The more treasure we give to God at St. Thomas's, the less uncertain will our future be, because we won't be worried about whether we have enough staff capacity to run world-class music programs, to have clergy who don't just preach relatively well or celebrate the liturgy with reverence, but who also have time for pastoral care, particularly for our older parishioners, outreach to students and younger people, and Christian formation opportunities for everyone, young and old.

In the end, investing in St. Thomas's doesn't make our future *more certain*, only *less uncertain*. That is to say, investing in St. Thomas's makes us better able to abide the uncertainty that is our lot in life. As the past few years have demonstrated all too painfully, we never know what life is going to throw our way. But we can't let the uncertainty of life keep us from living in faith, hope, and love. We can't let the uncertainty of life keep us from gathering, whether in person or online, in worship and Christian formation. We can only make the immediate future of St. Thomas's itself a little less uncertain by giving of ourselves, our souls, and bodies, our time, talent, and treasure, so that between now and the coming apocalypse, we can be sure that we are living lives that are truly worth living, the life that leads to eternal life.

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