November 16, 2025
St. John's Tappahannock
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Luke 21:5-19; Isaiah 65:17-25

Let's begin by briefly comparing our OT and Gospel readings today.

Today's reading from Isaiah describes God's new Jerusalem as a panorama of joy where there will be no more suffering or distress. This is happening now as God is creating a new heaven and a new earth – God is completely transforming the universe. These images give us a feeling that we are in the hands of an awesome God.

Today's reading from Luke is apocalyptic, full of fear and terror imagery we associate with the end times which apparently precede the New Jerusalem.

The last several weeks in the gospel we have heard how the Sadducees have challenged Jesus in the time prior to his crucifixion. The atmosphere is tense, and Jesus' enemies are looking for ways to destroy him and listening very carefully to all that he is saying.

The first verses of the Luke reading (5-7) illustrate the consequences of the temple leaders' rejection of Jesus and his teachings in the temple. The images of the stones of the temple tumbling down echoes Luke 20:17-18. After the telling of the parable of the vineyard, which a metaphor for the consequences for those who reject Christ, Jesus says, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

In today's passage we see cosmic disasters and persecution of Christians, which show that the events of the end of the world are related to the destruction of Jerusalem. This underscores a major point in Luke – that the crisis which Jerusalem faced in Jesus' ministry is a harbinger of the crisis which Jesus and his message and his coming as the Son of God will bring to all who dwell upon the entire face of the earth. A couple of verses later, Jesus encourages his disciples to endure. (21:18-19) "But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." (Jerome Commentary p. 714)

So we have to hold both the ideals of our greatest hopes for God's creation illustrated in today's Old Testament lesson, and the realities of the periods of history when the brutalities of human existence seem to be dominating. We must be strong, endure and discern how to live in the meantime.

I came across a youtube presentation by Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe at Virginia Theological Seminary last spring. He spoke about our current panorama of co-existing yet disparate worlds. Those of us here today live in relative comfort and have meaningful activities and good friends and loving families. Yet we look at the institutions around us threatened and slowly crumbling and we often feel helpless as individuals or as the church to do anything about it.

Here are some of Bishop Rowe's comments, paraphrased from my notes, about our current challenges.

He points up that since the 1960's there has been a widespread crisis in confidence in institutions, including the Episcopal church.

He says he dislikes when he hears “I love mission but I hate institutions”, because institutions can do more than individuals , however, he does recognize that we all, institutions and individuals, need to do all we can. In addition, everything we do must be tied to justice, courage and truthfulness.

As a church we are reckoning with our past complicity in racism and slavery of the past. And we are concerned with present and future justice. He said we should look to Kelly Brown Douglas, who was also present at the VTS conference, and who is one of the first 10 Black women to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church. She was an Associate Priest at Holy Comforter Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. for more than 20 years.

She holds a degree from Denison University and a Master of Divinity and Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary. Her most recent books are “Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter.”

She makes a point that I think is an important part of today’s message. We who are here today represent those at the center in our culture, and the marginalized, whom we are called as Christians to serve, are at the edges. We need to place the marginalized at the center. We need to prioritize helping those who have the least, as Jesus taught throughout his ministry.

As we see illegal refugees rounded up and sent perhaps to detention centers for unknown timeframes, and access to food denied to those who need it most, and ballrooms built instead, we have more than ever to try to turn these priorities around.

Sean Rowe emphasizes, however, that it is not our role to become political hacks. We are extensions of the Bible, not of political parties.

We need to articulate our position as God's people grounded in the gospel, guided by our identity as the risen body of Christ.

Specifically the Presiding Bishop suggests:

- Immerse ourselves into political crisis
- Not just by making statements, but through actions and resources
- Don't endanger people we are trying to help
- Oppose gov't over-reach and recklessness
- Think "Action not Reaction"
- Do not make the mistake of thinking we are already doing enough. Sometimes we only see our performative self-righteousness, yet still we miss the people at the margins.
- He wants us to weather the storm, and learn lessons from the past.

In conclusion he closed with this: We can love our church and yet desire to reform it. As Bishop Desmund Tutu once said, "God depends on us: isn't it staggering that this should be so?"

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to briefly describe a group of people in England called the *Divine Carolines* who provide an attitude with which to live during these challenging times.

During times of uncertainty and contention it is helpful to look to our Anglican Heritage to give us strength, wisdom and insight. Coinciding with the volatile decade of the 1640's in England we see the spirit of God present in a handful of like-minded Anglicans.

Anglican deacon Nicholas Ferrar and his family moved to a place called Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire to found a religious community that lasted from 1626-1646.

This refers to a group of writers, poets and theologians, also referred to as *the Divine people of the Caroline Period*, who lived during a turbulent time of Cromwell and Charles I and the English Civil War. The community shared a common desire in their own ways to define what the Anglican Church represented.

They were deeply committed to holy living, to the Book of Common Prayer, and to the sacraments. They valued scripture, tradition and reason with special regard for the Church Fathers as a lens on the world. They were known for their liturgical emphasis and desire *to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness* (verse 2 from Psalm 29).

They embraced a life of voluntary poverty and simplicity, so as much money as possible went to relief for the poor. They taught neighborhood children and looked after the health and well-being of people of the community. Some wrote pamphlets and devotionals about the life of prayer.

The community attracted much attention and was visited by King Charles I more than once, seeking prayerful sanctuary, during the English Civil War.

We live in a world of darkness and light. There is only one place to turn in trying to make sense of evil that lives side by side with goodness and civility, and to remain grounded. We must keep turning to God. To our daily practice. To come week after week over a lifetime to worship God in the beauty of holiness – where we begin by the lighting of candles that dispel the darkness, and continue with sacred procession, vestments, music and texts, and where we know we will 'hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts'.

T. S. Elliot included a poem in honor of Little Gidding, in his Four Quartets in 1943. (It written during the air raids on Britain during World War II – certainly another turbulent time).

This was a series of poems focusing on the unity of time, perspective, humanity, and salvation.

Little Gidding by T.S. Eliot

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall

And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half heard, in the stillness
Between the two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always--
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

Little Gidding V,
Four Quartets -- T.S. Eliot (1943)

Resources:

1. *2025 Albert T. Mollegan Forum with the Most Rev. Sean W. Rowe Panel Discussion*; www. youtube.com

Link to video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIrYB3TYbUk

2. T.S. Eliot; The Four Quartets; *Little Gidding*; 1943