

**The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 28
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
November 15, 2009**

The Robert E. Lee Hotel was a Winston-Salem landmark. It was the nicest hotel in town. Many society functions were held there, things like Debutant balls and proms in addition to big business gatherings and civic functions. The Robert E. Lee is where I met my wife, Kay. I was working in a band in the locally popular Roof Garden ballroom. Kay's date introduced us. That was in 1955; the rest is history. (Did I hear someone say 'ancient history'?)

Sometime in 1960s, it was decided that the Robert E. Lee had passed its prime. The great hotel that had occupied an entire block of downtown Winston-Salem took only seconds to implode. In no time at all this building of many memories and honored occasions was simply a very large pile of bricks and steel.

The twin towers of the World Trade Center were a great symbol of commerce and world trade. They were huge and among the tallest buildings in the world. They too were brought down, not with a planned implosion, but rather as the result of a planned horrible act of terrorism. Where passenger jet aircraft were used as explosive guided missiles piloted by religious fundamentalists.

Last Monday, we remembered and celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall. On November 9, 1989, the wall separating East and West Berlin came down. People who had been trapped by the wall were suddenly able to move freely without fear.

Of course, many of our structures are built for noble and worthy purposes. Such was the temple in Jerusalem; such was the World Trade Center. Our walls, on the other hand are another story.

Over the centuries, people have built walls to keep people out and keep people in. Even the biggest and the best – the Great Wall in China - have had only limited success over the long haul.

In the world of recovery, we say that the best definition of insanity is: “Continuing the same experiment and expecting different results.”

It seems as if we do not even learn from contemporary history. Look at the wall built in Israel to wall out the Palestinians. Look at the wall built on the boarder between Mexico and the United States. It must be easier to build a wall than to do the work needed to overcome the real barriers of fear and distrust that separate and divide us.

In today’s gospel, Jesus is coming out of the temple when his disciples comment on the tremendous stones and buildings that comprise the temple. No doubt Jesus upsets them when he says “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here on another; all will be thrown down.”

This of course proved to be the case as the Roman army led by General Titus destroyed the temple in the year 70 AD. There is a marble archway still standing in Rome that is a tribute to Titus and the destruction and plundering of the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the temple encounter, Jesus seems to be saying that even our grandest structures are subject to destruction and decay.

While we strive to build for permanence --- society, events, needs, social and political structures change and so do our monuments and even our most hallowed places. It seems there is nothing that is permanent.

Before I go further, let me say to you that these are difficult texts. The gospel today has made a very dramatic turn. The nature of this gospel is in the genre of apocalyptic literature. It speaks of the predictions of the end times – times of tumult and discord, times of upheaval and judgment.

The gospel is telling us – in images that are not definitive – but painted with a broad brush – that our world is not permanent – that it has often lost its center and its meaning.

Jesus uses the destruction of the temple to put forth the truth that even our most profound earthly constructs are passing – even the temple. In fact the real point of today’s gospel is that the temple – where God is housed - will be destroyed and the new temple will not be a structure – God will be found in the resurrected Jesus.

Jesus is the new temple. As such, He is the hope for our journey. He is the house of God in this world – Jesus is our security and our stability – not our own structures of either stone or ideas, politics or economic theories.

What can this mean? How might that look and work?

In Coventry England, there stands the ruin of an ancient medieval cathedral. It is the shell of the historic Coventry Cathedral, bombed by the German Luftwaffe in World War II. Yesterday, November 14, marked the 69th anniversary of that horrific night. Everything burned except the stone walls, which remained upright.

The burned out cathedral now stands next to the new ultra modern cathedral. But it is not really a ruin; it is, rather, a sanctuary and a monument.

Coventry Cathedral is one of the world's oldest religious-based centers for reconciliation. Using a national radio broadcast from the cathedral ruins on Christmas Day, 1940. The cathedral Provost Dick Howard declared that when the war was over he would work with those who had been enemies to build a 'kinder, more Christ-like world'. Coventry's Community of the Cross of Nails – is now an international network of reconciliation.

The cathedral's mission is fostering reconciliation as a major component of the church's worship, witness and discipleship.

Well, it certainly took a long time and a lot of buildings to get here, but now it comes --- so what?

Well for starters, Coventry is how Christ, as the new temple, is at work in the world. Even in the destruction of a magnificent cathedral – the spirit of Christ's love and compassion abounds. There are no walls that can keep Christ in out or in. Christ is alive in the world.

For us, the so what is this: Will Christ be alive within our walls at Holy Comforter? Will the new walls we are building be monuments to tradition or resources for ministry? Will the radical compassion of Christ radiate from our new buildings?

Will we be extending his love and compassion to each other as we teach and learn in our new spaces? Will we be extending his love and compassion as we continue and expand our ministries of Loaves and Fishes and Room in the Inn?

Will we be extending his love and compassion as we continue to expand our ministry to Hispanic and Latino persons in Charlotte?

Will we be welcoming and inclusive of those who are different? Will we be here for Christ when the culture and society tells us to hunker down and build walls of prejudice and ethnic xenophobia?

Will we rise above the politics of fear and selfishness and work for Christ's justice and peace?

Christ does not live in the church. Christ, the temple of God, lives in the world.

The church's challenge is whether it will be open enough to let him in.