

## Trinity 25 (Propers for Epiphany 6) (2024)

One afternoon, some ministerial students fled the confines of their stuffy theological college to play basketball at a nearby court.

When they finished, on their way out, one stopped to engage with an older gentleman seated in a folding chair reading his Bible. He was there to lock up the facility for the night.

**“What are you reading, old man?”** asked the young hot-shot theolog.

**“Revelation,”** came his answer.

**“Do you understand it?”** asked the young man in a cocky and condescending tone.

**“Well, yes, I do,”** said the old man.

The young man, to the amusement of his mates, said, **“Do tell us so we will know.”**

Putting his worn leather Bible on his lap, the old man looked up and said: /// **“God wins.”** ///

Their balloon was pricked. They walked off in silence.

Of course, the old man was right. “God wins” is Revelation in a nutshell.

There will be trials and trouble, tribulation for God’s people, but in the end comes victory and vindication.

At our Lord’s final epiphany at the end of the age, the new Jerusalem will come down from heaven to earth, according to Rev. 21.

The veil separating our space from God’s space will be pulled aside.

Jesus will appear and be present with His people.

Falsehood and wrong will be judged.

God's people, many of whom have suffered for the faith, will be openly acknowledged.

Tears will be wiped away from all eyes, and death will be no more.

The story begun in Genesis will at last arrive at its great and final crescendo.

New heavens and a new earth will appear, the new no doubt coming out of the ashes of the old.

All of this can be summarized in two words, the same two words spoken by the old man at basketball court: God wins!

This message, however, is not confined to Revelation. It permeates the whole Biblical story, including Matthew 24, the chapter from which today's Gospel is taken.

The words in this chapter are part of an extended teaching Jesus gave on the Mount of Olives. Hence, it is known as the Olivet Discourse.

Not long after He and His little band had come into Jerusalem for what would be their last Passover, the disciples, in the fashion of tourists, marveled at the beauty of the Temple.

It was a magnificent building. Situated on the highest point in the city, it dominated the skyline and glistened in the sunlight.

It was at this point that Jesus took them apart and told them what would soon befall the building they had been admiring. It was to be reduced to a pile of rubble.

**“See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down,”** He told them.

They must have met His words with shock and disbelief. It would be like hearing a street preacher outside the National Cathedral in Washington say: **“Take a good look at this building. Soon it is coming crashing down.”**

You would think he was crazy . . . unless, of course, you had been there on August 23, 2011, when a 5.8 magnitude earthquake almost did just that.

In the case of Jesus, His words did in fact come true. In A.D. 70, Romans soldiers under a man named Titus surrounded the city and subjected it to a great siege. At the end of the siege, the city, including the Temple, was burned and laid flat to the ground.

Let me pause here to say that what happened to the Temple and almost to the National Cathedral reminds us not to put down our tent pegs too deeply in the ground of this present age.

The things that appear so secure, including buildings, institutions and governments, are transitory. They can be swept away in the twinkling of an eye. Life itself is of this order.

Rather, we are to set our hope on the living God. The rest, the stuff of this age, we are to receive, use and enjoy, but not turn into a god. To do so is to make a pact with death.

But back to Matthew 24. Before we picked up reading in today's Gospel, Jesus had warned His people that when they saw the armies of Rome approaching and surrounding the city not to stay and fight but to get out of town. The city and its Temple were under divine judgment.

Historians of this period say that the Christians did just that. They fled and were spared.

But the Jewish religious leaders and others who had rejected Jesus stayed to their own

detriment. The siege that preceded the burning of the city resulted in horrors beyond imagination.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, describes what happened when the Roman soldiers at last entered the city:

**“When they were come to the houses to plunder them, they found in them entire families of dead men, and the upper rooms full of dead corpses, that is of such as died by the famine; they then stood in a horror at this sight, and went out without touching anything.”**

What they saw, Jesus foresaw. **“For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be,”** He says in Matthew 24:21.

The destruction of Jerusalem was more than a gruesome calamity. It was a sign to the world

that Jesus was in the right and that those who rejected Him and nailed him to a cross were in the wrong. He was the true Messiah.

Moreover, it said publicly what the Ascension had said more privately: Jesus was now reigning. The Kingdom of God had come in heaven, even if it had not yet fully come on earth.

Enthronement is what is being described when we hear Jesus say in today's Gospel: **“They shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”**

That language comes straight out of Daniel 7. In a vision, the Old Testament prophet sees one like the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven – going up -- to the Ancient of Days – God the Father -- and being made co-regent.

Let me say here that you and I have a place in the picture Jesus paints in the Olivet



Discourse. We too will be raised up, openly acknowledged and vindicated. What's true of the King is true of His people.

What God the Father said of Jesus at His baptism, "This is my beloved child", He will say of each one of us on the last day.

So, take comfort. Don't veer from the faith. Stand firm in the storm.

Beyond that, in today's Gospel we learn that there will be false messiahs and false prophets. They came in olden times, and they are around today. Learn to recognize them when you see and hear them on television and on the internet.

How might you do that? /// Perhaps the chief way is by staying close to Jesus and the inspired scriptures. Read the latter for yourself but also in the company of the faithful down through the centuries. Don't go off on tangents.

More than that, pray that the Holy Spirit will alert you to the spurious and false and give you hearing and understanding of what is true and of God.

At the end of today's Gospel, we find these words:

**“And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”**

These are words of reassurance of God's provision and care. They remind us that we are not alone. There are more over us watching than human eye can see.

Tribulation is part of life all the way up to our Lord's Second Coming.

Yet, we are never alone or without hope. He who went up into heaven will come in like manner. History is going somewhere.

The old man in the story with which I began was right: God wins!

Let that thought sustain and encourage you as you watch the evening news, as you see bad things going on in the world, as you yourself face various temptations to compromise and go along.

Don't be overwhelmed by the negative forces out there. You are on the winning team! Stay faithful.

Do the little many tasks that God lays in your path. Light a candle rather than curse the darkness. Refute falsehood and error. Name and shame false prophets. Stand for justice and truth. Serve others in Christ's name.

Live as who you were declared to be in your baptism – a child of God and an inheritor of the Kingdom of heaven.

For such a time as this God has placed you where you are. Never doubt it.

Hope is the message of today's Gospel.  
Receive it and live it!