St. Columba's Episcopal Church
November 16, 2025 – 23 Pentecost
Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning we prayed these words together: "Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ"

"Hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." This is a very thorough process and not one that happens by simply listening to or reading the written word we have in the Bible. It's more than learning what is written. If you have been a long-time church goer and read the Bible at home as well, there are probably portions of scripture that you know almost word for word. I was about to say, "by heart." That expression comes near to the words "inwardly digest." For in scripture the heart signifies our thoughts and feelings and our wills. We are called to take scripture to heart, to let the ideas and stories we find in scripture shape how we live our lives. Today we asked God to grant us the grace to heed this call.

That said, it is clear that some Christian people take to heart certain messages of scripture that others prefer to leave alone. The lesson from Luke that we just heard is an example, with its predictions of earthquakes, famines, plagues, portents, and signs. Some Christian groups focus on all this. The Episcopal Church does not.Deciding how to sift through scripture and choose what to "inwardly digest" and what to "spit out" is a complex process. In this denomination we are not inclined to dictate what people must believe. In my view, that is a great strength of our church. But it does leave us with the work of making our own decisions.

I think we are on the safest ground if we keep the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the central story of our lives and faith. This includes the teachings of Jesus: in parables, in the Beatitudes, and in his behavior. How did Jesus live? How did he interact with people? How was he shaped by prayer? As I've mentioned before, Jesus' teaching is in keeping with the voices of many great Hebrew prophets who preceded him. I believe we need to take to heart their messages about justice and mercy and truth, about God's desire for the needs of the poor and the oppressed to be met. These prophetic voices, like Jesus' voice, ring out to declare God's ways more clearly than other words in scripture do.

As Christians we believe that the Bible is the <u>living</u> Word of God. We do not regard it as simply an ancient religious text, worthy of study because of its historical interest or its words of wisdom. The Bible <u>is</u> that, and much more. What Christians believe is that God continues to speak to people through scripture in powerful ways. The Holy Spirit works through the Bible now with the power to transform hearts and minds and lives. Power that is beyond the power of mere human words to reach people's minds and hearts. Divine power. Transcendent power. Living power. Power that changes people's understanding and way of life.

In the Gospels we learn that Jesus faces the hard facts of human life and calls his followers to join him in facing truths we might like to avoid. In this morning's passage from Luke, he warns his listeners that trouble is coming. People were admiring the temple in Jerusalem, "how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God." The temple was the center of Jewish religious life, a magnificent human accomplishment. Jesus says, "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." In fact, by the time Luke was writing his Gospel, the temple had been destroyed by the Romans. The work of human hands does not last forever.

Jesus refers to other terrible events: wars between nations, earthquakes, famines and plagues. He warns his followers that they might be arrested and persecuted because of their faith in him, betrayed and even killed. Again, by the time Luke was writing, this had already taken place. Jesus was himself in Jerusalem for the last time, about to face his own death.

So, what can it mean when Jesus promises, "But not a hair of your head will perish?" If this isn't utter nonsense and a complete departure from Jesus' habit of facing hard facts, what can Jesus mean? We need to recognize that Jesus is looking at the big picture, the biggest picture of all, nothing less than the coming of God's kingdom.

The prophet Isaiah was looking at that picture, too, when he gave voice to God's promises: "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating." We hear of a new Jerusalem, where no one weeps or cries out in distress, where people enjoy the fruits of their labors and live out their full span of life. God promises, "Before [the people] call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear." There will be peace: "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together." "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord."

Because it is God's plan and God's work, this is where we are going. The challenge for all of us who are living in the time between the promise of God's kingdom and the coming of God's kingdom is to keep the big picture – God's picture – in mind as we live our lives in the world as it is now. The challenge for us is to remember, in the words of the Canticle we prayed this morning, "Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid."

Christian faith is about letting God's vision of the future shape what we do in the present, as individuals and as a church. If we believe what Isaiah has written – that God's coming kingdom is a kingdom of peace, love, and justice – then we must practice peace, love, and justice now, while we wait for the coming of God's kingdom. In lives guided by God's vision of the future we show that our faith is substantial and real.

It is all too easy to get lost in the world's vision of life and forget God's vision. We are tempted to put our trust in what is less than God, to hope for less than the coming of God's kingdom. We may become discouraged when we see and think of the evil in the world, the suffering of so many people, the damage being done to the earth. It is difficult to live in peace, to love our neighbors, to work for justice, to allow God's ways to become our ways, to take to heart the lessons in scripture. The followers of Jesus who have gone before us have also had these challenges. St. Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right." May the Spirit of the living God strengthen us to walk on, doing what is right, in Jesus' name. Amen.