

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text is the last verse of this morning's Gospel Lesson. Jesus, having spoken about the trials and tribulations of the end times, says this:

By your endurance you will gain your lives.(Luke 21:17-19)

Or, as the King James Version puts it:

In your patience possess ye your souls.

This, then, is meant to be a sermon on hope and quiet endurance even when much of your world seems to be collapsing.

This past Thursday, the opening page for AOL included a photograph of a snow-covered mountain in central Russia¹. The photo included policemen standing guard on the hillside where twenty-nine adult Russian cult members and four children are hidden inside a snow-covered cave in the Penza region of central Russia. The members are said to be awaiting the end of the world.

The policemen are guarding the cave to make sure that nobody provokes the people in the cave, because those people awaiting the end of the world have threatened to blow themselves up if police intervene.

They entered the cave on November 7th and they expect the world to end next May. They have food and fuel supplies with them in their cave. The police hope they will leave their cave when their supplies run out, but who knows how this will end?

A local priest, Father Georgy, said this about the people in the cave: "They are simple Christians. They say: 'The church is doing a bad job, the end of the world is coming soon and we are all saving ourselves'."

But if Jesus were to walk into that cave to talk with these folks, I think that what he would say to them is what he says to us this morning:

By your endurance you will gain your lives. If the church is doing a bad job, try to make the church better. At least try to make your own village better by showing forth Christian virtue. In your patience possess ye your souls.

Hope is not withdrawal from this world in preparation for the world to come, but rather quiet endurance in this present world. To see this, let's try to heed the teaching of Jesus in this morning's Gospel Lesson.

Let's begin at the end of that reading, for that last verse is the pinnacle of his preaching about the end times. The modern translations of this last verse are probably the right ones from a grammatical point of view. The ones I checked all translate that verse as a declarative sentence, calmly giving us useful information:

¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your lives.

Yet I cannot help but prefer the good old King James Version. It translates the verse as an imperative sentence. It does not simply share information, but exhorts, rushing ahead to try to save our lives:

¹ http://news.aol.com/story/_a/sect-holes-up-in-cave-to-await-doomsday/20071115174909990001?ncid=NWS00010000000001

¹⁹In your patience possess ye your souls.

“Possess ye your souls.” Acquire your soul! Get your soul! Go fetch your soul! Notice that the King James Version is not speaking of anything so mild as your “life” — no, it speaks of your “soul.” It speaks of your life under the lens of eternity. It speaks of your life from heaven’s perspective. It speaks of your life from the angle of your Maker’s intention that you should live forever in unity with Christ.

How to do this? How to possess your soul? “In your patience.” Or, as the modern versions put it, “By your endurance.”

Again, this is the high point of this morning’s Gospel Reading. This is the pinnacle toward which the reading climbs. Jesus begins by discussing the Temple in Jerusalem. In the eyes of the disciples, that Temple is an awfully impressive structure, like, say, the Metropolitan Museum of Art here in our city. But Jesus has seen heaven. He comes from the heavenly mansions. The Temple in Jerusalem seems not to overly impress him. In fact, he prophesies that that Temple will be destroyed. And it is, within a generation after his crucifixion.

Well, that must have been a stunning and discouraging thing for the disciples to hear: This Temple, which seems so solid and so impressive: there is going to come a day when it is no more. Life will have to go on without the Temple.

Then Jesus multiplies the worrisome prophecies. He lists one trouble after another:

“Take heed that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them. ⁹And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified; for this must first take place, but the end will not be at once.” ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.

And, then, more personal trials:

¹²But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake.... ¹⁶You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death;

And, then, as the summit, we have our text: Jesus appeals to his disciples to be steadfast and to endure through it all:

¹⁸But there shall not an hair of your head perish. ¹⁹In your patience possess ye your souls.

In the category of classical Christian ethics, with this final verse Jesus is urging that, no matter how dark the night, his disciples should remain people of hope. What is hope? It is not so much a sentiment or an emotion, but a conviction, the set of the soul, that in spite of what the eye can see, you still expect good to come. It is a reaching out of the soul toward a good future, even when all around is chaotic, disappointing, and discouraging.

And the virtue that is appropriate for hope is patience or quiet endurance, but not endurance in resignation or retreat to a cave, but rather the willingness to pursue the good that lies available to you, while confidently waiting for a greater good to come.

Hope contemplates life and strives for a middle path between resignation and retreat from the world, on the one hand, and covetousness on the other. The Kingdom of God is coming. Of that we can be certain. Hope, then, tries to walk that middle path between indifference toward this passing age and anxious grasping after this age.

For us modern folk in New York City, I suspect that the greater temptation is the threat of covetousness. Covetousness is that restlessness which supposes that we must have everything *now*. Covetousness conducts itself as if there is no tomorrow. It supposes that it must grasp

everything now, as if there is no heaven to fulfill the hopes and dreams left unfulfilled by our own efforts. Covetousness has no use for the Savior, for it imagines that it must save itself here and now.

Suppose you were ninety years old. For some of you, there is no supposing to it, for, God bless you, you really are ninety years old. Should the likelihood that you cannot finish some great deed mean that you should not even start it? Suppose there is some reconciliation and forgiveness still waiting in your life. Should the likelihood that you might not have long to enjoy that reconciliation, if you should manage to achieve it, mean that you should not even begin the movement toward peace? Hope says, Full steam ahead! If time should run out before you have managed to accomplish what you would love to accomplish, at least you can begin, and in beginning, be found on the right path by your Lord. You can start the good fight, and leave the issue to Him.

And for you young ones, hope means that honesty is better than prosperity, for it is better to walk with Jesus than to own all the cattle on a thousand hills. Settle it in your hearts, then, that you do not mean to grasp everything here and now. You will receive only what you can receive fair and square, in accordance with your frequent prayer, "Give us this day our *daily* bread." Not our life's bread, but our daily bread. That is, we work honestly for today, and trust the future to Jesus.

And for those of you who have long been enduring a deep disappointment, do not despair. Do not give up hope. Do not imagine that your future will be dry and desolate and lonely. Do not fear that your future will be an endless repetition of today's sorrows. No! You are baptized. You belong to God. You are meant for happiness and you will have it. Meanwhile, be as happy as you can be. And be as good as you can be.

Why should you have hope? Because you have a Savior who is determined to bring you good, to land you safe over the Red Sea, to land you in a land where God himself will wipe away every tear from your eyes.

This good thing Jesus shall do, and meanwhile, let us possess our souls by patience, doing the good that lies available to us, neither retreating to a cave, nor yielding to covetousness or panic.

Do not grow weary in well-doing, but live for Jesus today and in confident expectation of the fulfillment of your life tomorrow, through the grace and merits of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.