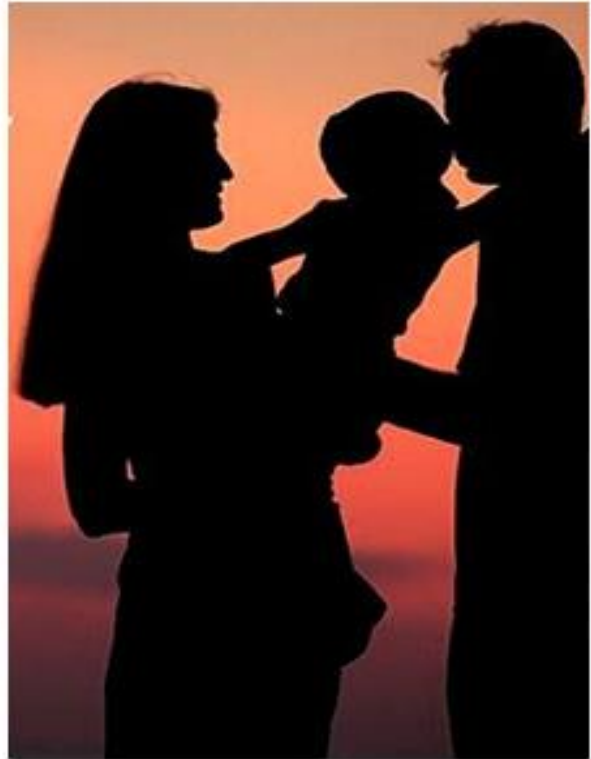


# Not a hair on your head will perish

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> November  
2016

**Luke 21:5-19**



Walt Kowalski sits on his peeling, somewhat dilapidated front porch. He is bitter, cantankerous and bad tempered. After having spent half a century working on the assembly line in the automobile industry, the local Ford plant is on the rocks. Manufacturing has moved off-shore where wages and overheads are cheaper. Walt's home town of Detroit is in steep decline. Crime rates are on the rise as gangs of unemployed youths roam the streets. The local demographic has changed as Afro-Americans, Latinos and Asians move into what was once a homogenous white working-class suburb.

Walt is a Korean War veteran. Moreover, he is mourning the death of his beloved wife of fifty years. His health is ailing and the kids are chasing their inheritance, wanting to put Walt in an aged care facility so they can auction the family home and sell-off his prized possession, a magnificent 1972 Ford Gran Torino.

Walt's world is collapsing. He is a lapsed Catholic resenting what he sees as the lack of experience and the naivety of the local priest whose pastoral care appears to be no more than a shallow form of paternalism.

And then right next door a family of Laotian refugees move in. Walt finds it difficult to come to terms with his new neighbour's way of doing things. Their incomprehensible language, the aroma of their spicy food, their tightly-knit extended family unit and a tendency to walk across his property evoking a menacing warning from Walt to "*keep off my lawn!*", breeds a degree of frustration and anger. Here Walt remembers, Walt laments the way things once were.

(2)

The movie, Gran Torino, starring Clint Eastwood, focuses on the experience of a blue-collar worker dealing with unsolicited change. While resenting the customs and the habits of the new people next door, an unlikely bond develops between Walt and his Laotian refugee neighbours. It's worthwhile viewing this provocative movie to see what unfolds.



Communities like those blue-collar suburbs in Detroit are going through massive paradigm shifts. In other words, basic understandings, assumed values and cherished ways of doing things are all being contested. No longer do these things maintain the recognition or hold the legitimacy they once had. And for people like Walt Kowalski, life has become, messy, confusing and deeply fragmented. It is as though everything is up for grabs, everything is either being ditched, trashed or abandoned.

Such a scenario is not simply limited to America's "rust belt". Here in Australia workers in the northern suburbs of Adelaide and in the regional city of Geelong are faced with the closure of their automobile manufacturing industry. In Port Pirie and Port Kembla workers are experiencing what it means to be retrenched as the steel industry winds down.

In the dairy industry farmers are being squeezed by new international trade deals and corporate monopolies. Meanwhile, jobs are being limited in other areas as driverless trains will be introduced to Sydney's new metro and a new intercity fleet to serve Newcastle, the Blue Mountains and the Illawarra will have no guards.

To face retrenchment or to lose one's job is a heartbreaking experience. To be told one's expertise is no longer needed can be devastating as new approaches, new methods or new ways of doing things are seen to supersede time-honoured skills.

Indeed, we soon learn that the many things we hold to as being of real value and significance do not actually have any ongoing permanence. And here we can either yearn for a glorious past, for the "good old days" - or we can move on by addressing the challenges these unwelcome changes bring no matter how big or small they are.

I remember growing up in church where children were seen and not heard. Laurel and I raised our three children with this in mind and I remember saying to my daughter, Jane, one Sunday morning "*what should you do in church*"? She would reply "*shhh!*"

(3)

But now it's generally considered improper to expect children to be quiet during worship services. Children are now freer to make noises. This is because changes call on us to acknowledge that our little one's have the right to express themselves openly and creatively in church along with adults.

Change - we are all confronted with it. The question is, how do we handle it?

Last week I listened to the words of President-Elect Donald Trump as he exclaimed: *"Today, our movement comes full circle. Today, we have the opportunity to create an America that wins. Today, we will make our dreams, our hopes - our limitless potential - a reality. Today we vote - Make America great again!"*

It seems to me that, in wanting to proclaim: *"Make America great again!"*, the President-Elect is invoking a return to old paradigms. He is advocating a journey back to the "good old days" rather than attempting to address the harsh realities of the present. And, if my observation is correct, this could be problematic.

In our Gospel reading today we come face to face with the temple in Jerusalem. This magnificent edifice was the heart and the soul of Judaism as it centred the nation's focus on God. Still under construction by Herod when Jesus visited Jerusalem, the temple was considered to be one of the largest and most magnificent structures in the Roman Empire.

Built upon Mount Moriah, the outer court could contain up to 400,000 people while the inner courts, where the priests carried out sacrifices, saw hundreds of thousands of animals pass through as burnt offerings were made to God.

For many Jews the sight of the temple mount brought tears to their eyes. Here was the dwelling place of the one true God. Here people gathered to meet with their Lord and to celebrate their identity as God's people.

The temple in Jerusalem was like nothing else. This was God's dwelling place on earth. This was the centre of everything that was important. This was most sacred of all places!



(4)

And in one breath Jesus says it will all be destroyed. In a matter of a few words Jesus predicts the temple will be levelled. This magnificent edifice will be no more!

Now, this was harrowing, if not mortifying news. To suggest this great institution, to claim this magnificent centre of religious life would be no more amounted to blasphemy. It was simply unthinkable.

However, in the year 70 the Romans put down a Jewish rebellion. They sacked Jerusalem and systematically destroyed the temple. It was a horrific time. This act altered the course of history for the Jews and it set the scene for the rise of Christianity as Jesus himself, and not the temple, became the focus of humankind's encounter with God.

So, today we read a passage of scripture that speaks about the demise of the old and a foretaste of something new. And in doing so, Jesus makes it quite clear - things will not be easy. *"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom."* There will be betrayal and persecution. There will be suffering and even the loss of life.

But in all this massive change, in this turbulent demise of the old and in the bewildering emergence of the new, Jesus makes it clear - *"not a hair on your head will perish"*.

In other words, through the process of change - whether it be a massive change in life circumstances or whether it be a peripheral change to the way we do church - God will always be there. God will be there to protect, to sustain and to carry us through.

Early Christianity survived the turbulent destruction of the temple. And it moved on to become a world-wide movement where millions upon millions of lives were transformed by a love that could not be bound or extinguished by any form of change.

And so it is for us. When faced with massive change, when confronted with huge paradigm shifts, we do not need to be afraid. We do not need to back off or retreat.

So, friends, when faced with such changes, don't put your head in the sand. Don't retreat or close in on yourself. Don't get flustered or angry. Rather be open to possibilities. Be accepting of the opportunities that unfold.

Don't allow cherished institutions, time-honoured ways of doing things hold you back. Don't let long established assumptions cloud your vision or cause you to retreat. For the only thing that really matters is Jesus Christ. The only way forward is God's call upon your life.

Last year Laurel and I visited London. There we attended Evensong in Westminster Abbey. The canon was speaking and, as we sat in the congregation amidst all the splendour of that magnificent gothic church a lump came into my throat.

(5)

In his homily, the canon went on to say that, all this splendour, all this magnificence will one day pass away. One day this grand place will be no more. Time will catch up on it, events will overcome it. One day this awesome abbey will be nothing more than a pile of rubble.

But what will remain, what will survive the impermanence and fickleness of everything around us, what will transcend all the changes that are heaped upon us - is the love of God gifted to us in the person of Jesus Christ. And, that, my friends is what it's all really about!

Think about it for a moment. As you go on, be confident about the future. Be willing to embrace the changes. Be ready to step out. Be prepared to take on those paradigm shifts by taking the risk and leaving behind what is necessary. For as you do so - God will always be there.

Friends what we hold onto as being significant, what we covet and what we refuse to let go of is nothing compared to who God is and to what God has in store for each and every one of us.

Remember, in times of change, in times when the most cherished things are contested and even have to be given up, God is there. God is always there!

For, while Jesus says *"not one stone will be left upon another"* - he also assures us - *"not a hair of your head will perish."*

Brothers and sisters in Christ - in times that are changing, often radically, for each and every one of us, this is Jesus' assurance, this is Jesus' promise.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.



John Barr