

## Gospel text

### **Luke 21: 5-19**

While some marveled at the beautiful stones and votive pieces with which the temple was decorated, Jesus said to them: "One day, all that you observe will be destroyed and not one stone will be left standing." Then they asked him, "Teacher, when will this happen and what sign will warn us of it?" Jesus answered, "Be careful not to be led astray. For many people will come forward under my banner claiming to be me and saying that the final moment is about to come. Do not follow them. Likewise, when you hear of wars and disasters, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen long before the end." Jesus added: "Nations and kingdoms will make war against each other, there will be great earthquakes and famines and epidemics everywhere, and there will be fearful things and signs in the sky. But before all this, they will lay hands on you to persecute you and bring you before courts of law, heads of state or governors, and to throw you into prison, all because of me. This will give you the opportunity to give a testimony. Do not worry in advance about how to defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that your opponents will be unable to attack and contradict. Moreover, you will be denounced by your parents, your brothers, your relatives and your friends, and they will cause some of you to die. Hatred will fall upon you because of me. However, you will not lose a hair in vain. It is through your perseverance that you acquire your inner being."

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## Gospel commentary - Homily

### **Are all these protests in the world useless?**

Every night<sup>1</sup>, at 10 p.m., Mahvash, an Iranian student, opens the window of her fifth-floor apartment and starts shouting. The neighbors repeat her refrain "Women, life, freedom". Soon, her chants against Iran's theocracy echo from block to block, over the riot police, and throughout Tehran, the capital. Almost all the voices are those of women. "Blood spilled unjustly will boil until the end of time," says an old Persian saying, now back in fashion.

Nearly a month after protests erupted over the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman detained by the morality police for showing too much hair, Iran's ayatollahs are still struggling to maintain order. Fear has dampened the initial euphoria of the protesters. Mohsen Amiryousefi, the head of the film directors' association, was jailed for two years after signing a petition calling for the release of three of his members. The prisons are so full that warehouses have been requisitioned as detention centers. Passers-by say they can hear the screams. Many activists in Tehran admit to being paralyzed by fear. Some have fled to the mountains.

But schools and university campuses remain hives of dissent. Students waving headscarves chanted against Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's ruthless president, during his visit to Tehran's al-Zahra University on October 8. The average age of the protesters was reportedly 15. A Norwegian human rights group estimates that 23 of the more than 200 protesters killed to date have been children.

Doesn't this setting remind us of the gospel stories about the end times, such as the one in Luke proposed by the liturgy? The story begins with the announcement of the destruction of the magnificent building that was the temple of Jerusalem, which Herod the Great had been renovating for several years. The tone is set, nothing is eternal, everything has an end. But when we want to know when the destruction of the temple will take place (this destruction will take place in the year 70 by the Romans), Jesus does not answer the question immediately, but first speaks of the atmosphere in which his disciples will live after his death. What is this atmosphere?

Luke puts together two situations which he presents in turn. The first situation is the one transmitted by the Jewish apocalyptic accounts of his time, which evoke terrifying events coming from nature (earthquakes, famines, plagues, celestial phenomena) and from society (wars), but also evoke the difficulty of hearing the word of God because of false prophets. One can remain pensive in front of this list of horrors, but the apocalyptic narrative insists on one point: a world must end before a new one can appear, and for many, especially for those nostalgic for a bygone world, it is the end of the world and a terrible tragedy. Think of those who miss the old Soviet empire. And the sentence: "Many will come taking my name... do not follow them". Could this not evoke some situations, such as the one where Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill <sup>2</sup> - who thrived as a KGB informant during the Soviet period - presents the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a form of sacred resistance against an alleged LGBTQ+ threat from the West: in a March 2022 sermon, he described LGBTQ+ rights as "the forced imposition of a sin condemned by divine law."

The other situation presented by Luke is that of the Christians of the years 35 to 80, described in his Acts of the Apostles where Stephen is stoned, Peter and John experience prison and must constantly justify their actions, Paul undergoes a long trial, before dying a martyr in Rome with Peter. When the gospel announces that "you will be denounced even by your fathers and mothers, by your brothers, your relatives and your friends, and they will have many of you condemned to death", we have an echo of the atmosphere of the church in Rome under Nero. But is this all in the past? We need only think of Iranian Homa Hoodfar, imprisoned for her involvement in feminist activities; Saad Ibrahim Almadi, 72, sentenced to 16 years in prison in Saudi Arabia for tweets critical of the regime; Salma al-Shehab, a Saudi student sentenced to 34 years in prison for forwarding tweets from dissidents to the regime. The list of voices silenced either by prison or death could be long. But one might ask: what does this have to do with the gospel witness? Jesus announced the coming of a kingdom, and it is the whole of humanity, regardless of religion, that is called to collaborate by opening up to the spirit that he has left us.

Is there any good news in today's gospel? First of all, there is this sentence: "I will give you language and wisdom that none of those who are against you will be able to oppose or contradict. Jesus promises to support the people who have to testify. But one may ask: what good is this wisdom against people who are not rational? The important thing is that we ourselves find the meaning of the action we take, and this gives us the strength to continue our testimony.

Then there is this strange sentence: "But not a single hair of your head will be lost". Literally, this means that the physical integrity of the person will remain intact. But we know that this is impossible. So we should rather understand that despite the attacks of the opponents, everything we do will be valuable, will not be lost. Just as the slightest flutter of a butterfly's wing has an effect, however small, so what we do will have an impact, even if we don't see it.

Finally, there is this statement translated differently by our Bibles: "By your perseverance (NRSV: you will save your lives; ASV: ye shall win your souls; KJV: possess ye your souls; NIV: you will win life; NAB: you will secure your lives; JB: will win you your lives." The Greek verb that has been translated as "save", "win", "possess", "secure" literally means: to get, to acquire. And the Greek word that has been translated as "life" or "soul" is the one that gives us the term "psychic" and designates the breath of life of the person and distinguishes it from his body, and therefore designates his inner and conscious being. Thus, we could translate the statement under the pen of Luke: it is by your perseverance that you acquire your inner being. What does this mean? What we are is constantly evolving, and the events and conflicts in which we may be involved contribute to building the inner being we can become.

The life of Jesus can summarize all that has just been said. The echoes left by the gospel accounts of his public life show him in confrontation with many groups, especially the most religious. One of the reasons given for his death is that he attacked the temple in Jerusalem. But how could a man like him have had this audacity? One can only imagine that very early in his life he dared to speak out, to assert his convictions, to denounce the unacceptable. This is how he "acquired that inner being" that would express itself in all its strength in Jerusalem. Nothing was lost (not a hair of his head was lost), for his life was extraordinarily fruitful. By his perseverance in the midst of contrary winds, he has given us a world that is a source of life for all.

No one can predict what will happen to Iran or Saudi Arabia. But what is certain is that the perseverance of people who refuse the unacceptable and affirm their conviction will not only bring about a transformation of their being, but will plant a seed that will amaze us. Nothing will be lost. And for the believing outlook, it is the strength of the spirit left by Jesus that is at work.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, October 2022

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<sup>1</sup> This story is from the October 12, 2022 issue of [The Economist](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/10/12/despite-lethal-repression-irans-protests-continue?frsc=dg%7Ce). For the full text: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/10/12/despite-lethal-repression-irans-protests-continue?frsc=dg%7Ce> ▲

<sup>2</sup> This is what Richard Foltz reported in an article published on October 22, 2022 in the Montreal newspaper [La Presse](https://www.lapresse.ca/debats/opinions/2022-10-21/l-homophobie-comme-guerre-sainte.php). For the full text (French): <https://www.lapresse.ca/debats/opinions/2022-10-21/l-homophobie-comme-guerre-sainte.php> ▲