

The most important building in Jerusalem at the time of Christ was the Temple. It was the holiest shrine for public Jewish worship, and it symbolized what Israel was about as a nation. All that's left of it today is what they call the Western Wall, or the Wailing Wall. In the year 70, enemy troops from Rome invaded Jerusalem, where the Jews had revolted against Roman rule a few years before. The Romans demolished the most important building in Jerusalem and the holiest shrine imaginable, the Temple. There's been nothing like it in history.

The World Trade Center and the Pentagon may not have been the most important buildings in the United States, but they symbolized what we are about as a nation: commerce and military might. Maybe if religions had been stronger in America, the attackers would have destroyed a cathedral, a synagogue, or a mosque, just as the Romans once destroyed Jerusalem's Temple. I don't feel especially complimented that the way to terrorize Americans is to go after our office buildings. But truly, as a nation, we are more emotionally involved in buying and selling, protecting and defending, than we are in worship and service. Sometimes it takes our enemies to uncover where our values have been.

In today's gospel, shortly before Jesus died perhaps in the year 30, he stands before the most important building in Jerusalem, the Temple. While everyone is admiring its beauty, Jesus predicts that the whole thing will come tumbling down. He also predicts wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, awesome sights from the sky, betrayal by family members, arrests, torture and death. On some days, Jesus could appear rather glum. Everything he predicted came true within 40 to 50 years of his death. Jesus was not predicting the year 2001; he predicted events that took place in the lifetimes of his disciples. He did it so accurately that all his words and deeds earned more attention.

Why did the first Christians suffer persecution? Jesus gives a very interesting answer to this. He says this suffering happens for a specific purpose. He says, "It will lead to your giving testimony." When the disciples were arrested and put on trial, they used the opportunity to evangelize. Right in the face of their enemies, they spoke up about their faith. Yes, many of them lost their lives, but their faith has lived on.

The persecution of America has had similar results. It leads to our giving testimony. We are flying the flag. We are rallying around our freedoms. We are working harder at being united. Suffering has led to testimony, and that has made us stronger.

Suffering has always been included in God's plan. The hope Jesus expresses in today's gospel is that we use our suffering as an opportunity to recommit ourselves beyond the flag and to the gospel. Then, in the future, our most important buildings will not be skyscrapers and pentagons, but homes and churches.