

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who brings the Kingdom of Heaven on the wind of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

I've been reading the book *Simply Jesus*, written by N. T. Wright, a former Bishop of the Church of England and professor at the University of Saint Andrews. In *Simply Jesus* Wright describes Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem as being like the Perfect Storm encountered by the fishing boat *Andrea Gail* in the book and movie by the same name. Some of the information in this homily comes from *Simply Jesus*...

It was late October 1991. The crew of the fishing boat *Andrea Gail*, out of Gloucester, Massachusetts, had taken the vessel five hundred miles out into the Atlantic. A cold front moving along the Canadian border sent a strong disturbance through New England, while at the same time a large high-pressure system was building over the maritime provinces of southeastern Canada. This intensified the incoming low-pressure system, producing what locals called the "Halloween Nor'easter." As Robert Case, a meteorologist, put it, "These circumstances alone could have created a strong storm, but then, like throwing gasoline on a fire, a dying Hurricane Grace delivered immeasurable tropical energy to create the perfect storm." The hurricane, sweeping in from the Atlantic, completed the picture. The forces of nature converged on the helpless *Andrea Gail* from the west, the north, and the southeast. Ferocious winds and huge waves reduced the boat to toothpicks.

Only light debris was ever found. There had, of course, been earlier “perfect storms,” but this was the one made famous by the book and movie. Keep these three major storms in mind as we look at the forces combining and centering on Jesus as he came to Jerusalem to become the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Hopefully, in the next few moments we can get our minds and imaginations into Jesus’s own day by examining another “perfect storm,” the one into which Jesus himself was walking as he set his face toward Jerusalem. What were the winds that gathered speed just then, rushing in upon him from various directions? What did it mean for him to be caught in the eye of this storm? More importantly, what can we learn from Jesus and the Perfect Storm of his journey and entry into Jerusalem?

Jesus had to set himself to go to Jerusalem because that was where all the action was in the first century. Maps of that time almost always showed Jerusalem as the center of the world. Jerusalem is located on a mountain we call Mount Zion. In case you don’t already know, this was already an important place. This was the same mountain where God instructed Abraham to take Isaac to sacrifice. The very place where the Temple Altar stood was the place where Abraham had built the first altar for sacrifice. Jerusalem was not only an important religious location, it was also of supreme importance internationally. The territory of Israel had been fought over by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and was at the time of Jesus was

important to and controlled by Rome because it was the crossroads through which all the goods would pass coming from Africa and from the far east. The Roman storm was the wind blowing in from the west during the first century when Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. Under Octavius Caesar Rome became a military power as well as a theocracy with Octavius “Augustus” Caesar as its chief priest and military commander in chief. Rome actually needed the middle eastern territory for more than just its transportation routes. The Galilee region was especially rich and fertile. At the same time Rome was so over populated they couldn’t possible feed and cloth its own population. They depended on Olive oils and grain from Israel in order to survive and they had the military might to enforce their taxes and other imports.

What other forces contributed to the perfect storm and led to the crucifixion? Here we have a powerful storm even more powerful and complex than the Roman storm front. It was the Jewish story of Israel. The Jews of Jesus day thought of themselves as living out the epic story of their God. Their story was going places. God was still leading them from slavery through the Wilderness, and now through the freedom of the Promised Land. God’s story wasn’t finished yet. God had promised them a Messiah to sit on King David’s throne. Most of the Jewish people living in Palestine at that time were actors in God’s ongoing drama. I believe this kind of thinking is not very common today. We tend to think God has

either died or has left the building and isn't coming back any time soon. Not so in the first century. People's expectations for the Messiah were real and palpable. They had lived in this ongoing drama for over a thousand years and expectations were high to say the least. Their story, like a great costume drama going on over many generations, stretched back to Abraham, Moses, David, and other heroes of the distant past. It was all going to come to its great climax, they believed, any moment now. It was a single story, and they were at its leading edge.

So, whereas the Romans had what we might call a retrospective view, in which people looked back from a "golden age" that had already arrived and saw the whole story of how they had arrived at that point, the Jews cherished and celebrated a prospective view of society, looking forward from within a decidedly ungolden age and longing and praying fervently for the freedom, justice, and peace that, they were convinced, were theirs by right. God would do it! It was going to happen at last... and soon! That was the nor'easter blowing in and crashing headlong into the gale wind of Roman power blowing in from the west. These two themes—the great evil empire and the coming royal deliverer—combine to form two thirds of the perfect storm Jesus has now set his face to encounter.

As in the book and movie titled *The Perfect Storm*, it takes three great weather systems to create that perfect storm. The hurricane coming from the southeast was God Himself! So much of the hopes and inspirations of the Jewish

people relied on God's will coinciding with their own national will. The hurricane that added to the gale winds of the evil empire of Rome and the national aspirations of Israel was the wind of God... This is God's moment, declares Jesus, and you were looking the other way. Your dreams of national liberation, leading you into head-on confrontation with Rome, were not God's dreams. God called Israel, so that through Israel he might redeem the world; but Israel itself needs redeeming. So, God comes to Israel riding on a donkey announcing the coming of His peaceful kingdom and announcing judgment on the system and the city that had turned their vocation in upon themselves instead of blessing the other nations of the world. All his public career Jesus had been embodying the rescuing, redeeming love of Israel's God, and Israel's own capital city and leaders couldn't see it. The divine hurricane sweeps in from the ocean, and to accomplish its purpose it must meet, head-on, the cruel western wind of the pagan empire of Rome and the high-octane high-pressure system of national aspirations of the chosen people of Israel. Jesus seizes the moment, the Passover moment, the Exodus moment, immediately after coming down from the mount of transfiguration to set his face toward Jerusalem and the perfect storm was set in motion.

How does this perfect storm play out today for Christians in the 21st Century? Since the 1950s Christianity has been in a free fall. These United States

used to be a Christian nation and Church was the center of society. That is no longer true in the 21st century. We're more like the Jewish people of the first century than we would like to admit. How many of us long for the golden era when our pews were full and everyone we knew was a church going Christian? Our story is a forward-looking story. Like those Jewish people in Jesus' time, we too are looking for God to come again. We long for the day when Jesus will set things right and the Church will once again be the centerpiece of society. Unfortunately, we also fall to the temptation to stop being the blessing to the nations that God intends and to start looking inward to keep our traditions and the little status we have left. This would be a mistake! God's wind is still blowing into our days just as surely as Jesus slowly, but deliberately made his way to Jerusalem.

May we recognize the forces of empire, Church tradition and expectations of God's glory for the human forces they are while hitching our wagons to the one and only Wind of God who will take us on an incredible adventure of grace and love. May we reject the temptation to put national aspirations and religious expectations ahead of what we see God doing right in front of our faces. May we set our faces on Jesus and the Kingdom of God He came to bring to earth. Amen.