

Sermon

Sunday 3 December 2017
Advent Sunday

Lessons Isaiah 64: 1 - 9 1 Corinthians 1: 3 – 9
 St Mark 13: 24 - 39

Prayer of Illumination

May the energy of the Spirit, the essence of the Word, flow through us, filling us to overflowing, that we may be one with the Spirit present in all things. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.

These are dramatic, frightening and earth-shattering words from the lips of Jesus. Seated with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, surrounded by fig trees, Jesus said, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes'. The Son of Man, He said, will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.' These are strange, strange words. What are we to make of them?

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the day on which the Church traditionally looks forward not only to the Incarnation, to the first coming of Christ, the son of Mary born in the stable of Bethlehem, but to the Second Coming, to Christ's return. The Gospels promise that,

with the call of a trumpet, the Jewish shofar, the Son of Man will come to us in a cloud with power and great glory.

Jesus said, 'Look at the fig trees....as soon as they sprout leaves you can seethat summer is already near. So...when you see *these things* taking place, you will know that the kingdom of God is near.'

The rabbi from Nazareth points to new birth, new life, and said, 'This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.'

What are we to make of this apocalyptic vision? What might it have meant when Jesus first spoke these words and do these words have any meaning for us today?

If we take ourselves back to the Mount of Olives, we take ourselves to place of historical and spiritual significance. It was on the slopes of Mount Olivet that David, the king, wept, and, said the prophet Zechariah, it will be on the Mount of Olives, the sacred hill, on which YHWH, the God of Israel, will one day stand. It is here, on this holy ground, that Jesus was sitting with His disciples. Facing west, from their elevated vantage point, looking over Jerusalem's walls, they had an uninterrupted view of the temple. It is here that Jesus describes His apocalyptic vision.

The language of wars, famines, earthquakes, clouds, trumpet calls and angels is metaphorical rather than literal, poetic rather than scientific. In the Old Testament, in the Book of Isaiah, there is an almost identical picture painted of the fall of Babylon in the sixth century BC, the overthrow of the kingdom by the Persians. As far as we know, the sun, moon and stars remained in their places despite all that the prophet said! So, the language is metaphorical, but it does point to a dramatic turn of events. In the case of Babylon, it was the fall of city and empire which led to the liberation of the Hebrew people by the Persian king, Cyrus. The exile was over and the people returned to their home, to Zion, to Jerusalem.

In the case of Jesus and the Gospel writers, the dramatic event was the sacking of the city of Jerusalem in 70AD by four Roman legions led by Titus, and the destruction of the temple. One legion, the *X Fretensis*, made its assault from the very spot where Jesus and His disciples sat. It is perfectly reasonable to argue that Jesus saw it coming. When He told His disciples that, 'This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place', He meant that, within forty years, Jerusalem would fall.

The story of Babylon, its fall at the hands of the Persians, is one of captivity and liberation, of death and resurrection, of the Hebrew people: the dry bones living. Pointing to the fig trees around Him, Jesus said that, after death; after the fall of Jerusalem, there will be resurrection, new life, after the winter comes the spring. He told His disciples: be alert, be on guard, for when such trials come, the kingdom of heaven is near. If we take these dramatic verses of Scripture literally, we may be waiting for the sun, moon and stars to fall from the sky, for the sound of a shofar and the Son of Man to appear riding on a cloud. But, correctly understood, these verses convey the trauma of turmoil, the upheaval that accompanies revolution and change; the uncertainty, the fear and the danger. Crucially, Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven is near.

Sitting on the slopes of Arthur's Seat, Jesus could repeat those very words, that same apocalyptic poem. He could again speak of wars, famines, earthquakes, clouds, trumpet calls and angels. He would be referring to the enormous changes being forced upon religion in our time, in our society. The sacking of Christendom by increasingly intolerant secularism is no less an assault than the destruction of the

temple by the legions of Titus. But, crucially, Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven was near.

The Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, describes five paradigm shifts in the history of Christianity. Küng describes the apocalyptic paradigm, the Hellenistic period, the mediaeval Roman Catholic paradigm, the Protestant Reformation and, from the seventeenth century to the twenty century, the modern paradigm. Through each paradigm, the Church has changed: its theology has developed and, in order to be missional, its language has had to take account of changing worldviews. In the twenty-first century, we are living through a paradigm shift. In the language of Isaiah and Jesus, the trumpets, the shofars, are sounding. Pope Francis said that, 'We are not living through an era of change, but a change of era.' To use the language of Küng, we are entering the sixth paradigm of Christianity.

Reflecting on the secular assault on Christianity, the philosopher, Don Cupitt, has said:

Is it possible for people, and even for a whole society, to lose faith in God? ... [If] it happens, [it is] not primarily because something they used to think existed does not after all exist, but because the available language about God has been allowed to become too narrow, stale and spiritually obsolete ... the work

of creative religious personalities is continually to enrich, to enlarge and sometimes to purge the available stock of religious symbols and idioms.

Jesus points us to the fig tree, to signs of new life. Where are they?

What will the Church in the sixth paradigm look like? The change may be traumatic, if not unsettling and disturbing.

Acknowledging that we are all different, for myself, I see the Church needing to become more spiritual, to learn again the language of spirituality, the inner life, and to sit more lightly than before with many of our doctrines. Surely, we have learned the lesson that doctrinal dispute is little more counting angels on a pinhead and that our best philosophical arguments are, as Matthew Arnold said, a pyramid of eggs. As the world shrinks, as trade and technology brings the world's religions into ever-closer proximity, we have the chance to see for ourselves the Spirit of God burning in the beautiful eyes of our neighbours: in the humanity of the Muslim, the Sikh, the Hindu, the Jew and the Buddhist. If we are blind, if we are blinded by our own doctrine, if for a moment we consider our tradition as absolute, the outcome may be bloody. Walking side by side in faith is essential for world peace and, perhaps, for human survival.

Pope Benedict said that, in its strictest sense, there can be no inter-religious dialogue. We must avoid all syncretism, all dilution of Christian truth. It may be that there are beliefs or practices in other world religions which I would find odd, distasteful or offensive but I sometimes think that of Christianity. The distinguished historian, Philip Jenkins, points to a time in our history when the Church was more spiritually open than it is today. Jenkins says that for more than a thousand years, Christians in the east happily lived alongside their Buddhist neighbours. Tracing their ancestry not back to Rome but to ancient Palestine, to the original Jesus movement, Christians bearing the name, the Nazarenes, moved across India, Central Asia and into China. In South India and along the coast of China, dating from the early Middle Ages, there are stone carvings depicting a cross which is growing out of a lotus flower, the symbol of Buddhist enlightenment.

Asian Christians, it seems, were comfortable in sitting alongside the great monastic and mystical traditions of Buddhism. For them, the lotus and cross both carried messages of light and salvation. The Nazarenes were followers of Yeshua, not Jesus. In some of their texts, they replaced the phrase 'angels and archangels and the hosts

of heaven' with the language of buddhas and devas. There is also evidence of Christian and Buddhist scholars working together to translate volumes of Buddhist wisdom. Jenkins goes so far as to say that the first books which form the foundation of Japanese Zen Buddhism were translated by a Christian bishop.

Jesus said, 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' We have nothing to fear. The God who was uniquely present in Jesus is present in each of us, in every human being, working through every world faith. In Genesis, God breathed life into all humanity, all humanity equally, not just Christians. In Ephesians and Colossians, the apostle Paul wrote of the Cosmic Christ, the Christ of God in and through all things, through the whole of creation. Jesus saw the Spirit of the Sacred in the midst of the Pharisees, in the eyes of a Samaritan woman and in the fragile frame of a child. In the Gospel of John, all things came into being through the Word, through the essence of the Divine, the energy of the Eternal. It should come as no surprise to us to find the Christ, the breath of God, in the followers of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

We have a home: it is Christianity. In our time, in a culture of science, as creatures of consciousness that have emerged through billions of years of evolution, as co-creators with God, I hope and pray that the sixth paradigm, the twenty-first century, will be a time of seeing our oneness, our unity, not only with our neighbours of all faiths and none, but with the Earth itself. We are already one, if only we would take off our cultural and religious glasses. If we wish to see Christ come on the clouds in power and great glory, we will. We will see Christ come again when we see Christ in all.

Amen.