

Sermon – 28.11.21

In 2017 Hurricane Maria struck the north-eastern Caribbean. More than 3,000 people lost their lives. In 2018 a 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck Indonesia. More than 4,000 people lost their lives. The 2019 monsoon in India was the heaviest in the last 25 years. More than 1,600 people lost their lives. The 2020 Californian wildfires devastated over 4-million acres. This year a 7.2 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti. More than 2,000 people have lost their lives. Meanwhile Ethiopia, Yemen and Afghanistan are being wracked by civil war, and the Mexican drug war, which has been raging since 2006, is still ongoing.

How does this make us feel? Do we feel that the world is becoming an ever-darker place, with hope, and the promises of God, feeling more and more distant? Are we perhaps tempted to despair? Do we call to mind the words of the 44th psalm?

23 Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!

Or, perhaps the 90th?

7 For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed.

8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance...

13 Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

Our readings this morning give us hope, and an argument with which to banish despair. We hear in the words of Jesus, echoes of the prophecy of Daniel (Dan. 7: 13-14).

During his life of exile in Babylon, God gave Daniel a series of prophetic visions in which he was shown the rising and falling of four major empires – commonly understood to be the Babylonian, the Medo-Persian, the Greek, and the Roman – followed by the judgement of them all by God. These visions reassured Daniel that, despite the Jewish people's current situation of exile, God would have the final victory.

We find these prophetic visions further fulfilled in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In this morning's passage we find Jesus pointing towards the final redemption of his people. Just as the great empires represented in Daniel's visions were all eventually thrown down, we may, with a certain hope, take heart at the promised return of our Lord, both as recorded here in Luke, and also as echoed in Revelation 1:

7 Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

And again, in chapter 14:

14 Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand!

It is not clear whether Jesus intended the ‘signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress’ to be taken literally (meteor showers etc.) or figuratively (political judgement of nations and governments). Either way, these will be earth-shattering events. To ‘Stand up and raise your heads’; however, is a posture of hope and confidence. And so, when we see these terrible things happening – whatever they may be – we may still say, along with the psalmist, ‘Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.’ (Ps. 33: 20-21)

We can trust that this redemption will come to pass because it is a work that God has already started. The coming of the Messiah was prophesied in Jeremiah, as we heard earlier this morning. It came to pass in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. And it *will* be completed on the last day. God does not start a work and not finish it.

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This morning’s readings remind us that, whilst we may trust that our Lord will return, we are currently in a time of painful waiting. As Israel waited for so many hundreds of years for the coming of the Messiah, so we are waiting for the return of our Lord – the Son of Man who will come with power and great glory.

But what does all this mean for you, and for me, today?

It is not just for our Lord’s return that we wait. I’m not here referring to waiting for bread to rise or cakes to bake, but for deeply-desired, heartfelt longings. There may be among us those who have waited, or may still be waiting, for the blessing of children, for a spouse, or for the remission of a disease like cancer. This waiting can be hard – very hard – and require great patience. Waiting for these things can try our spirits as well as our hearts and our and minds. Where is God in our waiting and our struggling? Where is God when our lives feel like they are stagnating, or perhaps falling apart?

I have two great prayers, one of which I have been praying and waiting on God for, for a long time. Last month God met with me in the early hours of one morning – I often wake then for a short while – and reassured me with 5 simple words. He said to me, ‘I have not forgotten you.’

I have not forgotten you.

I believe that it is true to say that if he has not forgotten me then he has not forgotten you. He would not have brought us this far only to abandon us now; not that I am suggesting that all our prayers will be answered in the way we would like, or that all of our waiting will produce the results we want, but rather that we may trust that God is working for our good, as we are reminded in Romans 8:

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.’

We are called, this morning, as we wait, to be on our guard and to wait with sober minds and spirits. It is easier to despair, to give up on our hopes, on our dreams, and on God, and to give in to consumerism, drunkenness and the worries of this life. But to do so would be to turn away from God, and to abandon all that Christ purchased for us on the cross.

God promised the people of Israel that that he would save them and that the Messiah would rule with justice and righteousness. He was faithful to that promise; a righteous branch did spring up for David in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. Not only was he made man, incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of Mary, not only did he take on his shoulders the punishment of our sins, dying in our place, but he also rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven and is at the right hand of the Father. Jesus, who knows what it is like to be human, who understands perfectly all our flaws and failings, all our trials and tribulations, is at the Father's side interceding for us.

As we enter this season of Advent, waiting and preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas day, we are reminded that he may be trusted in *all* things, regardless of how dark things appear. This present world will pass away, but Christ's words *will not*: they are trustworthy and true, and have a permanence beyond anything else.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.