

St Brandon's, Sermon for 13th November 2022.

Malachi 4:1-2a Luke 21:5-19

Remembrance Day

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This time last week those who were at church were seated differently, gathered around tables cafe style. The task at the end of the service was to remember back over the years of church life, and name the high and low points. These were entered onto a time-line to show this movement, these ups and downs and changes, in the hope that might help us see how God has steered us through everything.

Those who were part of the congregation of St Brandon's 24 years ago will have been remembering the moment of the fire and some of the emotions: fear, confusion, perplexity: why and how could this happen? And then the questions around whether it would ever be rebuilt, to what extent, and in what form? How would people be drawn closer to God if there was not a place of beauty able to inspire prayer and worship?

These must have been something like the feelings the disciples experienced when Jesus described to them the time coming when their magnificent, temple would be destroyed. The temple that represented the presence and centrality of God in their midst: the focal point for God's people. A temple started shortly before Jesus' birth that Herod was still adding to – it was in its ascendancy when Jesus spoke of its coming destruction and the stones being thrown down.

This warning was triggered '*When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with stones and gifts dedicated God*'. Its a very fine line, the difference between awesome beauty opening us up to God and taking us deeper into worship, and simply being awed by the beauty and led into valuing it for its own sake, sliding towards seeing the wonder of the building instead of the wonder of God: worshipping the building – or at least getting over-reliant on the building.

And he went on to cite many other devastations, man-made and natural that were to come, a fearful list that we hear still happening somewhere in the world every day of our lives.

Jesus is warning his disciples so that they may be prepared for the devastations and not read them as an absence or failing of his promise that the new Kingdom - the Kingdom of God in which all is put right and every tear wiped – that that kingdom of God **is** being built; that good and God will prevail; that the arrogant

and evildoers will be destroyed. Its just that its not a quick job: its going to have a very long time-line by human measurements. I wonder, if we could mark on a bigger time-line all the wars and destructions since records began, and all the constructive achievements, would we see progress? Movement towards the kingdom?

Jesus cautions his disciples against losing their nerve and listening to those that point to quick fixes, undermining their faith in his teaching and God's promise. He warns them that they will be harshly persecuted for their faith about which they speak but that his spirit will provide if they hold to him in faith. He assures them, "*That not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*"

We know from history lessons that this is not the same as a guarantee that you won't suffer horribly, be tortured, perhaps to death. It is about the spiritual safety of those who hold fast to God. I picture God operating with an unimaginably massive time-line, one where every person has a place, where every moment of every person's life is lovingly recorded: nothing missed, nothing able to spoil his loving interest in our lives as we live them, every hair on our head precious to him, longing to draw us closer and closer to him.

Scripture can be twisted to suit many agendas, and history shows us how distorted that message becomes when it becomes isolated as a mantra for glory in so-called holy wars. There is no glorification of war of any description. Those who celebrated Armistice Day in 1918, hoped for a new world, it was coined '*the war to end all wars*', that great hope was pledged again in everyone's hearts at the end of World War 2. Even so, Armistice Day 2022, for Ukraine will be remembered as the day Russian troops withdrew from Kherson: another marker in another hideous war. How humankind has failed to sustain peace on earth!

But the gospel message to us today is not to put all our trust and hope in man-made structures, material or political, nor to become consumed with fear of them but to keep our trust in God and try and build an inner security through the ultimate promise that Good will prevail, evil will not win the day.

The power of this promise, the vision of God's ultimate victory, is captured in the words and actions of many in the worst times – we see it in the legacy of wartime poetry and personal correspondence. It has inspired remarkable bravery.

These are the witness to a strength of endurance beyond human strength. Through these testimonies, great and small, we reflect today on the desire for peace and goodness.

Alongside our remembering the terrible price of lives lost and bodies maimed: love and life cut off before its time; alongside our honouring the memory of those who have given their service and lives for our peace, we recall the cost of war on all sides and pray earnestly for a new and better way to conduct our lives.

New and better ways to conduct our lives as nations, as neighbours, as individuals.

This elusive peace needs to start within each of us. Every person who witnesses to peace in the way they go about their daily rounds will influence another, and potentially change an outcome. Building the kingdom of God where peace and justice prevail is a long time-line, and we feature somewhere along that line in a place where we can help build. That kingdom will be built from small actions as much as anything. Every action produces its ripples, so we pray today for our own lives, that we may foster the fruit of the Spirit, enabling us to make loving, compassionate responses instead of violent responses, and not weary in doing what is right.

We here, look to build ourselves up as a body, encouraging each other in prayers and actions that aim to bring peace into others' lives. We, the people of St Brandon's have discovered for ourselves that stones can fall, covid can lock the doors, but prayer and worship go on unstoppably: a reliance on God and not man-made structures.

Let us hold to that, maintaining faith in the midst of this often hostile world, trusting in his faithful promise that all who have striven for good – the righteous throughout the massive time-line of human history – are, and remain, safe in his arms.

Amen