

Second Sunday before Advent

You see this beautiful cathedral, adorned with its rich architecture and soaked in theological meaning and in prayer? Are you fond of it? Do you love it? Can you imagine life without it? The time is coming when not one brick will be left upon another, all will be thrown down and destroyed and where will your beautiful cathedral be then? 'Has Canon Simon lost his senses' I hear you ask. 'No more than usual' you will all reply. Imagine the reaction someone would get were they to seriously preach or predict such an occurrence. To those who regularly worship here, with relatives perhaps from over a century ago who contributed to its building and perhaps even worked as a craftsman on the structure, and for those who work so hard to maintain the building in our own day, or who contribute to the ongoing running costs, worship, welcome and ministry of the cathedral in our own day. Questions no doubt would be raised – 'who does he think he is to be speaking to us in this way?' Great offence would likely to be caused by the speaker predicting such an apocalyptic event. Given the quinquennial inspection carried out and schedule of repairs to the building, the care taken to preserve a precious part of our historic heritage, it would seem almost unbelievable that someone would seriously believe that the building would collapse and would be no more.

And that is just what Jesus told his hearers. The central place of worship, the Temple in Jerusalem, so important to the identity and communal religious observance of any faithful Jew, thrown down? Not one stone left upon another? What on earth can he be talking about? Has he lost his mind? How far will he go to upset us? We can only imagine the offence those listening to his teaching took at what Jesus had to say, surely now he would stop. But there was more! Many would be seduced by so-called messiahs, preferring teaching that was more appealing to them, there would be war and uprisings, persecution where family members and friends would betray each other, apocalyptic events such as earthquakes, famines and tempests and then Jesus urges his hearers to remain faithful.

Now I have a confession to make before you all. The rota for preaching and presiding is compiled on a hopefully strictly rotational mechanism, it must be so, and it must have been my 'turn' or else, if I had anything to do with choosing the texts I wanted to preach on, today's readings would have been delightfully delegated to one of my more learned colleagues! What on earth is going on here and how on earth can we make any sense of the readings today for Christian living?

Luke chapter 21 is an extremely confusing chapter of his Gospel and contains what scholars refer to as 'apocalyptic writing.' As is usual with all passages that

are difficult to understand we have to get behind the text to understand what was believed by the people of Jesus' time to fully understand what was being referred to here by Jesus. The chapter rather movingly opens with the account of the widow's mite, the poor widow giving all that she had in offering to the Temple. After this Luke records Jesus as delivering the apocalyptic teaching.

Apocalyptic writing was no new thing and not peculiar to Jesus, elements can be found in the Old Testament most notably in the book of Daniel and indeed there are references to apocalyptic thinking and belief in the writings of the prophets. A clear example can be found in today's reading from Malachi. In this thinking there was a belief that there would be a future 'day of the Lord', that the present day was evil, only fit for destruction and that the day of the Lord would dawn as a golden age, however it would be preceded by a time of cosmic upheaval and destruction. Malachi refers to this as 'the sun of righteousness' a phrase with much inherent meaning. The sun of course is not particularly welcome in hot countries and people seek to avoid it, however when directly overhead it dispels all shadows and exposes everything to the light of scrutiny. The sun of righteousness is therefore heavily linked to justice. The phrase no doubt also contains notions of the coming of a heavenly figure who will appear to banish sin and re-establish goodness when the day of wrath and judgement has passed.

Luke was writing his Gospel at a time when the Christian community was experiencing severe persecution. Individuals were indeed being betrayed by their friends and family and many were tortured and killed and the imperative to remain faithful would have resonated with Luke's readers. Did this perhaps colour Luke's memories of what Jesus said or indeed give his gospel a certain slant in places? Furthermore there is the prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, which in fact did take place in AD 70, there was also a firm belief within the early Christian community of the imminent Second Coming of Christ and there were of course predictions of further persecutions to come.

Without writing this passage off completely and dismissing it is something challenging, perhaps yet to come, or some sort of misunderstanding of cosmic things Jesus was aware of but perhaps couldn't totally understand because of the limitations of his humanity - or perhaps the inability of language to explain the inexplicable, there are perhaps certain points that we are able to take away from today's passage.

Firstly then, to what extent is our faith and belief bound up with our churches? Have we made idols of them? If they were to be thrown down and be no more, to what extent would we still worship? How would we as a Christian community be visible or effective? Would our faith survive were everything we hold dear to be

suddenly taken away? What is the place of faith in our lives, in our society and in the pecking order of things?

Secondly, what, if anything is the place for communal religious observance within society today? We in the good old CofE have always taken for granted the belief that we are a Christian society, that faith is nurtured within the family and at school and that it is inherent within all of us. Most religious commentators would now acknowledge that that is no longer the case. Religious belief and practice has gone from the public square, so to speak, to being the preserve of the individual. The corporate nature of religious observance has widely disappeared and questions have to be asked as to where exactly and by what means faith and religious observance are nurtured. Are we in danger of extinction not because of persecution, but because of apathy? How much are we prepared to contribute?

Thirdly, we are fortunate in this country that we are complacent in our religious freedom to believe or disbelieve what we like, persecution is rare. There are however parts of our world today where to be identified as Christian results in severe persecution and possibly - some would say probably, result in death. Our own Bishop, in writing a report at the request of the Foreign Secretary even referred to the persecution of Christians in some countries being on such a scale that it is approaching genocide - yet this persecution is being left largely unreported. Were we therefore to be persecuted for our Christian faith, to what extent would we be able to remain faithful? For myself, speaking from the comfort of the Established Church in a wealthy western country I can honestly say that I don't know.

And perhaps finally, and most perplexingly for me, is the saying of Jesus that wars, insurrections, violence, natural disasters, plagues, signs and portents will take place. I remember my professor of Theology, Robin Gill once remarking that those who go up a mountain and predict the end of the world are in a sort of 'win win situation'. He said that if the end comes then they were right, but conversely, if the end doesn't come, then God must have heard their prayers and had mercy!

It is indeed natural to think of the apocalyptic nature of the images Jesus portrays as concerning the end times, but I am also going to suggest that there is also a sense of the inevitable about events such as these given the fallen nature of our world and that this passage perhaps refers not only of a time to come but of the imminence of the present. It is possible to interpret Jesus' sayings that each day is the last. Each time is the end time. Each human being faces the end of the world in the span of a life, whether that is eight minutes or eighty years. The world, its opportunities and losses, passes away for us each night. Every sunset announces a closing of a day that will never come again. Each human death brings about an

end and amounts to a tragedy. And each generation, like each death and every day, witnesses the signs of the end times. There is a sense that everything that Christ predicted has taken place and is taking place and will continue to take place. Life itself is the mystery, this great groaning of creation that finds its meaning in hope alone.

And so Christ counsels us not to be alarmed at our condition. Do not follow the false messiahs. Trials may come, persecutions may arise, but a person without hope is somewhat lessened. Hope is perhaps the greatest Christian asset. Hope that this is not all that there is, hope that things can be better, hope that there will be ultimate consumation and redemption for all creation, hope that in the final analysis that there will be ultimate meaning.