

Second Sunday before Advent

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on 17 November 2019

Readings: Malachi 4 vv 1-2a and Luke 21 vv 5-19

The Sundays before Advent have seen a change of emphasis in our readings. The month began with All Saints Sunday. Last Sunday, Remembrance Sunday, appropriately we had a set of readings about disputes: Job's dispute with God; and, in the Gospel reading, Jesus' dispute with the Sadducees over the question of resurrection life. In both of those readings we saw a tension between living life in the here and now, and living life in the Kingdom of God.

Today's readings take this (admittedly difficult) concept a little further. The very short reading from Malachi, a prophet intimately associated with Advent, leaves us in no doubt about the reality of judgement – with a promise of hope and restoration for those who 'revere God's name', those who believe in and worship God. The judgement of God may fill us with a degree of fear, but for the oppressed and for those who long for justice in this world, the thought of God's just judgement may indeed be appealing.

St Luke presents Jesus' teaching about the Temple in Jerusalem in today's gospel reading. This develops into a difficult and salutary conversation about troubles ahead. And sadly, so many generations have been able to see their experience in what Jesus foretells – whether natural disaster or persecution or war or estrangement. Or any combination.

It is hard not to see our contemporary world in Jesus' description of the horrors to come. In different parts of the world, we see religious persecution and intolerance of those who profess a different faith. We see fake news and politicians being economical with the truth. We are aware of the curse of modern slavery – of which more in a fortnight's time¹. We see famine. We see deeply troubling flooding in the Midlands and South Yorkshire in England. We see devastating forest fire in California and New South Wales in Australia – I emailed a couple who run a bed and breakfast in Nana Glen, a small town in northern New South Wales where we stayed for a couple of days last year. Their property survived, but three houses in the town were destroyed in the fires and they were evacuated for a couple of days at the worst of the fire. Some of us were reminded of the beauty and fragility of our planet in a memorable concert at St James last night.

Because of the power and immediacy of social media and news coverage, we are more aware than ever, if we open our eyes to see it, that our world is changing dramatically, and not always for the better.

But there are some important messages of reassurance in the apocalyptic, and sobering, language of the gospel.

First, God is unchanging. Even if the temple, the symbol of God's presence, is destroyed, God will remain. Our church buildings are important because they speak of the faithful continuity of faith across the centuries and turbulence and change we can scarcely imagine. Just have a look at the list of rectors of this parish, and the way the building has

¹ The reference is to a seminar on modern slavery, to be held on 30 November 2019. The speaker is Professor Kevin Bales CMG.

changed and developed, if you have any doubt of that. We need to be aware of the temptation of trusting buildings and institutions more than God.

Second, God is in control. 'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' In other words, in ways that we cannot comprehend, God is working his purpose out.

Thirdly, God is faithful. Whatever the persecution and violence that God's people face, even from close family and friends, God will protect what matters most: 'not a hair of your head will perish'.

As we think during these weeks before Advent of the Kingdom of God, we are all too well aware that we have, as it were, feet in both camps. We are part of God's Kingdom, experience glimpses of it, and look forward to being more fully part of God's Kingdom when our earthly life is over. But at the same time, we are fully aware of the frustrations and limitations of this world. Remembrance Sunday, and the daily diet of news of wars and rumours of wars throughout the world means we cannot escape the reality of human suffering and misery. Faith is to be rooted in the here and now. The future, because it is in God's hands, can take care of itself.

Christians are called, not to an other-worldly detachment from creation and the disasters around us, but to draw people to God's Kingdom, through that quiet work of faithful endurance and example, aware both of our own flawed humanity and of the fact that in spite of that God loves us, calls us to be his people, and welcomes us into his Kingdom.

In the words of the theologian Malcolm Guite, 'What we testify to is the final triumph of Love, the final radiance of a light that no darkness can comprehend or extinguish.' Or, as St John puts in the great prologue to his gospel, 'What has come into being in him [that is, in Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'