



Revd Ro's Reflection on Second Sunday before Advent

Hebrews 10.11-14, 19-25

Mark 13.1-8

Today is Remembrance Sunday. I am following the readings set for the second Sunday before Advent. Readings for Remembrance Sunday of course may vary and often The Beatitudes are chosen. I often think though that the reading set for today is quite appropriate for Remembrance,

⁷ 'When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.'

These words of Jesus could apply to any age. In our own time there are still awful wars and they and the aftermath of those wars bring suffering, the latest being the terrible situation in Afghanistan. Our prayers and thoughts are with those suffering people and all who suffer because of war. Today the world has its own war against the unseen enemy COVID 19 which is still raging, though we pray that vaccination roll out will control it. We also thank God for all scientists and health employees who are working so hard to help us.

We are, as I said last week, in the Kingdom Season, next Sunday it is Christ the King. The gospel passage for last week was Jesus' calling of the fishermen as he began his ministry, as he began to establish God's Kingdom on earth. Now we are in Jerusalem. He has entered the holy city greeted as King of David's line. How soon those hosannas will turn to cries for his blood. It is Jesus' last week on earth. He is approaching Calvary where he will reign as king of all. Our reading begins,

^{13.1} 'As he came out of the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!'

Our reading today cannot really give its true meaning without being put into context as is so often the case. Jesus has been in the Temple teaching; already the storm clouds are gathering, the ruling classes, the priests and high priest are fearful and angry. Jesus has just told the parable of the vineyard which of course is a direct attack on them. Chapter 12:

¹² ‘When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

¹³ Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said... ‘Later some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question.’

Here they are, the ruling powers, all trying to ensnare him all trying to trip him up. Here, in what should be the holy place, the religious leaders are doing their best to destroy God’s Messiah. Here is the centre of corruption not holiness. In contrast to this, as Jesus sits in the Temple watching those who put gifts into the treasury, he sees a poor widow. She puts in a tiny coin but it is all she has. She gives all she has to God. Her humility and sincerity, her true worship, stands out against the hypocrisy and evil all around. It is to this background then that Jesus leaves the Temple; he knows it is only a matter of time.

I remember going to Hereford Cathedral and seeing the 13th century Mappa Mundi. It is about 5ft by 4ft and it is on a single piece of vellum that is calfskin. The Mappa Mundi is a depiction of the physical and spiritual world as understood in medieval times. Our maps are depicted north south but at the centre of the Mappa Mundi is the holy city, Jerusalem.

Maybe we could understand this reading better by thinking of this aspect of the Mappa Mundi, in this reading Jerusalem is at the centre. More than that Jesus and the disciples have just left the Temple, the most holy place in all Judaism. Of course the disciples marvel at it. It was beautiful and vast, in Jesus' time it was still unfinished.

^{13.1} ‘As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’

They had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover; the Temple is the centre of worship but Jesus’ response to the admiring comment is stunning.

² Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

What on earth must they have thought, of course they questioned him.

³ ‘When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’

People have taken Jesus’ answer to refer to a cosmic change – in fact to the end time and the coming of God’s new creation. It is the Kingdom Season; advent looks forward to the coming of King Jesus at the new creation. Jesus says ‘but the end is still to come. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.’ Of course that is natural and there may be an echo of this. But go back to Mappa Mundi – Jerusalem is the centre. Mark is writing this around AD 70. The cataclysm in AD was the destruction of the Temple by the Roman forces.

⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise

against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.'

What is actually being described is the coming Jewish Roman war AD 66-73. It was to the Jews the end of the world. What began as a Jewish revolt became a bloody civil war. In the end more Jews were killed by Jews than by Romans. Jerusalem was under siege, the people starved and were driven to unspeakable lengths to survive. When the city fell thousands were killed and the Temple razed to the ground.

This is the cataclysm Jesus refers to. In those times of upheaval and destruction all sorts of would-be messiahs arose taking advantage of an uncertain and fearful time to gain power. All this would come. They would hear of wars, there would be signs, but the catastrophe is not yet. They have forty years grace.

Once again what follows our passage is important.

⁹ 'As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them.

¹⁰ 'And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.'

In a weeks' time the disciples will have their own catastrophe to face, Jesus will be executed and it will seem like the end of everything. Their own loyalty will be challenged and shaken to the core. Peter will deny him, others will run away, but on the third day Jesus will rise from the dead and conquer death forever. At Calvary he will win salvation and renew humanity's relationship with the Father. Yet they will have to stand alone when Jesus leaves them. The sending of the Holy Spirit will strengthen them and they have authorisation from God. That strengthening will be needed because they and all who follow Jesus will be persecuted. Not only is the message for the Jews, it is to be taken to all nations. This is the worldwide Jesus movement and it rests on their shoulders and the shoulders of those early followers. It is a responsibility which would crush them but for the empowering of the Holy Spirit of God.

¹¹ 'When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.'

Jesus' next words not only are prophetic of early Christianity but also of the Jewish civil war.

¹² 'Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; ¹³and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.'

His message for the disciples is to hold fast and to proclaim the gospel of Christ. There is still time before the cataclysm that will turn the Jewish world upside down.

When we hear of Mark's gospel as dated around AD 70 we should remember the backdrop to which it is written. We should thank God that even in all this chaos the message of Jesus is going from strength to strength.

Jesus has already driven out the money changers and disrupted the practise of sacrifice. With his offering of himself once for all on Calvary sacrifice is at an end. The Temple is not the holy place it is corrupted. The Temple and its rulers oppose Jesus, oppose the Messiah, oppose God's will and

finally seek to destroy him. Jesus is not destroyed, his is God's new way. Jesus has prophesied the destruction of the Temple, his new way destroys the old way and he is vindicated in triumph.

Jesus' warning is important. This new way will not be brought in without great suffering, without persecution. That of course is still true in our own day.

The Reading from Hebrews follows perfectly from our Gospel reading. Jesus' life, death and resurrection fulfilled the scriptures. The coming of God's Messiah had been an integral to the scriptures. Now in Jesus it is fulfilled. So the old way is obsolete, Jesus has put an end to the necessity for Temple worship. As it says at the start of the chapter,

^{10.1}'Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach.'

Jesus is our great high priest who has passed into the heavens. He made his sacrifice once and for all on Calvary and won salvation for us. There is no need for the High Priest to go in year on year making sacrifice for sin. Jesus has superseded all that. His final sacrifice has won forgiveness of sins for humanity. Of course the writer of Hebrews is writing pre the destruction of the Temple so he is pointing to the priests who are still doing just that. He is writing to the new believers to point out the futility of that old way. For those that have eyes to see, Jesus is the long awaited Messiah of Jewish scriptures. This comes just prior to our reading and explains the point clearly.

'He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.'

So our reading follows this and makes the point quite clear and emphatic.

¹¹ 'And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God', ¹³and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet. ' ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. '

Jesus' work is completed; he sits at the right hand of God having won forgiveness of sin. Jesus now intercedes for humanity in heaven. There is no longer any barrier between God and humanity. We remember that only the high priest could enter into the holy of holies and that only once a year. There was a curtain which separated the sanctuary which no one but he could enter. We remember that at the death of Jesus we are told that 'The curtain of the Temple was torn in two.' Well here it is in clear symbolism Jesus' death breaks down all barriers between humanity and God. We know that whatever our sin, whatever our burden we will be forgiven if we truly repent. That is, turn from sin and turn to Christ.

¹⁹ 'Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,

²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh),

²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full

assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.'

We have a new relationship, a new start in Christ. So, says the writer of Hebrews, what should you do? 'Let us approach with a true heart.' It is a call to worship, firstly by ridding ourselves of sinfulness and trying to live as Jesus has taught, by faith in Jesus, that is trust in him and his promises, also of course through baptism into his church, where symbolically our sins are washed away and we have a new start as members of Christ's family.

²⁴'And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.'

This to be done by meeting together for worship. That means corporate worship. As people meet together they are to encourage one another to follow the way of Christ encapsulated in his great commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you,' here reiterated in, 'to provoke one another to love and good deeds,' As with Jesus' teaching and so many of the writers of the New Testament, the message is clear, do not simply talk about it, live it out in your lives. Taken further, do not talk about my way then live your life in your own selfish way. We need to take that seriously. It is so easy to separate Christianity into teaching, preaching and worship. But that is only part, Christianity is what we do in our lives, how we live out Jesus' way, how we live out what we do on Sunday. Also of course corporate worship is important because it is Jesus' command and because it is what worship is all about, it is worshipping together.

During this pandemic we have had a taste of what it is like to be isolated, separated from one another. We have seen at first-hand what it is like when churches are closed and we can only worship on a computer screen or by ourselves. Ministers did their best to provide worship but it is never the same as worshipping together. For centuries Christians have worshipped freely and it was a huge shock and loss not to be able to come together. Now that is eased and people can worship, though there are still difficulties for the vulnerable.

Private worship is valuable but corporate worship is vital. The early church had another problem, persecution. You were less likely to be discovered to be a Christian on your own, worshipping in mass meant more danger of discovery. That of course is still true in parts of the world.

Holy Communion is central, it is our corporate act. This is not something done for us by the priest; we all take part in communion. Jesus's sacrifice is remembered, his body broken and his blood shed for us. It is not a sacrifice – that was made one for all at Calvary, it is a remembrance of it.

We thank God that we can come together to worship God once more. In our church communities we should be 'encouraging one another,' that is another question we need to ask. Do all of the people in the church feel valued, loved, part of the community? Do they all feel nurtured? Everyone is equal in the sight of God and our churches should be a place of welcome, of nurturing.

Our reading ends with the words 'and all the more as you see the Day approaching.' This takes us back to Jesus' second coming, to God's new creation on earth. We will all be held responsible for our actions.

As we approach advent our thoughts turn to Jesus as King and we need to examine our lives so that we live as he would have us do.

'For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory.'

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