



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Second Sunday before Advent

### Year C

Luke 21. 5-19

2 Thessalonians 3.6-13

This Sunday is of course Remembrance Sunday and often the readings set are the Beatitudes and Isaiah 2.

<sup>4</sup> 'He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.'

It is a wonderful vision of God's world where he will rule and there will be no more war, no more misery. We looked at this idea of God's new order last time and saw how the Jews looked forward to the day when God would redeem his people and his world. When death would have no more dominion and the dead would be raised by him. We look to this newly recreated order when Christ will come to judge the earth and rule once more. Today is the second Sunday before Advent and our gospel passage is by no means an easy one. Certainly words like this ring true to us,

<sup>9</sup> '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.'

Humanity has been waging war one nation with another throughout history; the first and second world wars are the focus for today together with all who have lost their lives in war. Once again war is being waged in Ukraine and thousands are suffering. While evil exists so will war, it was ever thus. Reading this passage now, almost two thousand years after it was written, means that it is inevitable that we put our own interpretation on it. It is wise therefore to go back to when it was written about AD 80-110. This is after the Jewish insurrection and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. That is the key to this passage.

Jesus has entered Jerusalem, he is teaching day by day in the Temple and day by day incurring the wrath of the powers that be. As he entered into Jerusalem he wept over it and foretold its destruction. Now once again the subject of the Temple is raised, his answer is the key to the meaning of this passage.

<sup>5</sup> 'When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, <sup>6</sup>'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

We wonder who the 'some' were. Who is speaking to Jesus? At first his reply seems general but as the passage goes on it is obvious he is addressing his followers and his disciples. This present Temple had been built by Herod the Great and beautified and added to over the years. It was seen as God's house; God's dwelling, it must be made as wonderful as possible for him. These adornments were at least focused on and were dedicated to God. The Jews were naturally proud of the Temple; it was the centre of everything to them. Imagine the consternation when Jesus says it will soon be rubble! Jesus does not say the Temple will weather or decay; this is not a natural act. No it is force, 'all will be thrown down,' it is destruction on a complete scale, 'not one stone will be left upon another.' Some years ago I visited Hereford Cathedral and saw the wonderful Mappa Mundi, the mediaeval map of the world. It is fascinating and a mirror into the mediaeval mind because at the centre is Jerusalem everything else radiates from that, the centre of Christianity, the site of the crucifixion and resurrection.

To the Jewish mind everything revolved around the Holy City with the Temple at its heart. God's very presence was in the Temple, Temple worship was all in all. Every Jew would want to travel to Jerusalem. Even today the Seder meal ends with the words, 'Next year in Jerusalem!' Jerusalem and the Temple gave them their national and religious identity; it was the centre of everything. Now suddenly Jesus is saying this wonderful ornate building will be rubble, it will be utterly destroyed. To the Jewish mind this would be cataclysmic, the end of everything. No wonder they were shocked to the core.

<sup>7</sup> 'They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?'

We know that this event will take place in AD 70. If we look at this passage in the light of these events things become clearer. Jesus is speaking some 40 years before it happened, this is his prophecy, Luke however is writing post destruction.

<sup>8</sup> 'And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them. <sup>9</sup> '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.'

<sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; <sup>11</sup> there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.'

When we read this now, looking back over history it is easy to see it through the lens of what we know. To say that indeed lots of people have misled people pretending to be the Messiah, that there have been numerous wars and natural disasters but that the end time is not yet. People have taken this passage as a direct reference to Jesus' second coming but that is anachronistic. We need to go back directly to Jesus in the Temple and to the people he is addressing.

Life then was even more uncertain than it is now. The Roman Empire sprawled across the world but the so-called Pax Romana existed at the point of a sword and the Empire was about conquest. It existed at the expense of the vanquished peoples. All was not well in Rome either, intrigue was rampant and Emperors came and went in quick succession. When Jesus talks about 'rumours of wars' it's difficult for us to imagine life then with no mobiles, computers or immediate technology. We can follow world events literally as they happen, but then news of wars far away would be

brought by word of mouth, no more than a distant rumour. Life was distinctly difficult and sometimes terrifying. No wonder they looked to the heavens for signs. This went on far longer, think of references to omens in Shakespeare and indeed those who follow horoscopes to this day!

Well, says Jesus, all these things will happen, the end of all is not yet but it is coming and soon. That is when the foolish Jewish rebellion will be ruthlessly extinguished. Thousands will be slaughtered, Jerusalem destroyed and the Temple, the symbol of everything they hold dear, the home of God will be razed to the ground. To them that was the end of everything! All this will happen, but it needn't have done. Look at what Jesus says in chapter 13,

<sup>34</sup> 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing!'

Jesus has come to rescue his people; he is their long awaited Messiah. He brings a new way, God's way of justice, love and peace. Sadly most reject him and the ruling powers have him killed. Jesus opposes the Temple worship as it stands now. It is a corrupt regime ruled over by men who are corrupt and seek only power and exploitation. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, when he enters the city, is symbolic of that. Stupidly the majority of the people have turned to ill-fated nationalism and that will lead only to utter destruction.

Now it seems that Jesus' tone changes and that the people he addresses are specific. These words are not directed to the general multitude but to his followers and to his disciples. Jesus has always been perfectly honest. To follow him means trouble, maybe death.

<sup>12</sup> 'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

<sup>13</sup> This will give you an opportunity to testify.'

Jesus underlines the persecution that will befall his followers from the moment he leaves them. That of course is another point, Jesus is pointing out that he will leave them and soon, that they must carry his words forward. Firstly however they must use this persecution, when they are on trial, as an opportunity to tell of him, to testify to his truth, to tell the story. How often has St. Paul said he has done exactly that?

The important point to remember he says is that those who follow him will never be alone. Jesus, when he appears in the upper room on the evening of the resurrection says, 'Peace be with you,' then breathes on them the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit descends upon his followers and they are transformed. Everything now is done in the strength of God.

<sup>14</sup> 'So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; <sup>15</sup> for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.'

Jesus is with them, they must trust in him and he will give them the words. That does not mean God will do it all, our relationship with God is a partnership but one in which we can say with confidence, 'We are never alone,' as we work for him. But there is the warning,

<sup>16</sup> 'You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup> You will be hated by all because of my name. <sup>18</sup> But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup> By your endurance you will gain your souls.'

If you decide to follow me Jesus warns, be prepared to pay the ultimate price. We remember his earlier warning about this. This account appears in Mark and Matthew. This is going to be an awful time and it will mean families will be torn apart. Some will think they are doing God's will by persecuting Christians as indeed Saul did before his conversion. Finally their steadfast loyalty to

Christ might lead to death but they will never be separated from him. Those who endure all patiently and with courage, and who remain loyal to him whatever comes, will reap the reward. They will be with him ultimately.

Jesus goes on with a specific warning to his followers about the destruction of Jerusalem.

<sup>20</sup> 'When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.

<sup>21</sup> Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it;'

His followers are not to stay when the catastrophe comes, there must be no nationalistic pride, no fighting, they must get out or risk destruction. With their destruction is the loss of the message they are charged with delivering to the world. Nothing is more important than Jesus. Though all this seems remote to us now the kernel of truth is the same. God is with us now and always and nothing must get in the way of Jesus. Not our own concerns, not our desire for our own way, not desire for power, not supporting a cause. Always ask the question is this of Christ? If it is fine if not walk away and make the vow to always be honest with ourselves.

As we read this now, especially with Advent round the corner and our firm belief in the Parousia, the second coming of Jesus, we can't help see glimpses of this in the passage but we do need to focus on Jesus' original audience and his clear message to them all. They rejected him, they were destroyed. We are Christians but how many times in life do things get in the way. We are human, we are fallible but we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, our hope and our salvation.

Chapter three is the final chapter of Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians. Interestingly what Paul is saying is similar to Jesus' words in that he emphasises that these new Christians should focus on the faith they have adopted and stay steadfast against all discouragement and in the face of persecution.

<sup>3.1</sup> 'Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you, <sup>2</sup> and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people; for not all have faith.'

Secondly Paul emphasises as Jesus has done that they are never alone,

<sup>3</sup> 'But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one.'

Whatever trials and tribulations they may have to face in Jesus' name nothing can separate them 'from the love of God in Jesus Christ.' Jesus will guard them; he will strengthen them by his Holy Spirit. People can achieve so much more; bear so much more with God. Alone they are weak; with him they will be strong enough to face whatever comes. Paul's faith in the power of his Lord and his faith in the new Christians shines out.

<sup>4</sup> 'And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command. <sup>5</sup> May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.'

This must have been so comforting and strengthening to these people who were having such a hard time and were new to the faith. They are still learning while being buffeted about by the world and those that would lead them astray. Paul's warning is very specific. Watch out for false doctrines and people who profess to be Christians but who do what they want, that warning is as old a history and as true now as it was then. People twist the word of God to suit themselves. It must not be so. They are to follow Christ's teaching as given them by Paul. Paul has no time for spongers either. When he



was there with them, teaching them as their leader he could have been an honoured guest, pampered and dined. Just like monarchs who went around stately homes with their friends eating everyone out of house and home!

<sup>7</sup> 'For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. <sup>9</sup>This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. <sup>10</sup> For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.'

No, says Paul, I set an example while I was with you. I earned my keep. That is exactly what you must do. I think by extension we could say Paul is emphasising our equality in God's eyes. No one is better than anyone else; no one should have to slave to keep someone else in idleness. That is not the way a healthy community works. He wants a healthy Christian community and Christ's pattern is the one to follow as Paul himself has always done. I suppose this next part has given rise to the phrase the devil finds work for idle hands.

<sup>11</sup>'For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. <sup>12</sup>Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.'

We all know the havoc that busybodies and gossips can do in a church, so does Paul. Work for the good of yourselves, the church community and Jesus. Busy yourselves with him and his worship. Most important is the last line.

<sup>13</sup> 'Brothers and sisters do not be weary in doing what is right.'

Last night I watched that golden oldie, 'The Winslow boy.' Eventually to get justice for the innocent lad a petition of right is granted with these words, 'Let right be done.' It's a fantastic phrase. The lawyer wisely observes, 'Anyone can do justice, it is doing right that is hard.' But we all know what is right; Jesus is the pattern for it. The question, 'What would Jesus do in this situation?' is a pretty certain guide. It isn't about what we want. It's about how Jesus would behave and that must guide our behaviour towards others, it must be our life's pattern. This is almost Paul's last piece of advice given in the letter signed with his own hand.

Anyone who refuses to do this says Paul needs to be warned that they are not following the way of Christ. I wonder how many people dare do that in the church now, or do we keep silent for peace's sake? Paul is clear,

<sup>14</sup> 'Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. <sup>15</sup>Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.'

I suppose that roughly translated means do not be afraid to stand up for what is right. Do so without malice but don't be afraid to speak out for the truth. The result of course is that people often find themselves shunned as Jesus warned in the gospel passage. Nevertheless it is the right thing to do. I finish this Reflection with the words Paul uses at the end of the epistle.

*Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways.*

*The Lord be with all of you.*

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