

SUNDAY 17 NOVEMBER 2024 – 2 before Advent

Daniel 12.1-3

Hebrews 10.11-25

Mark 13.1-8

The Gospels are full of the sayings of Jesus which you can only describe as apocalyptic, in other words they announce that something dramatic, even world-changing, is about to happen. Today's Gospel reading comes into this category, and the disciples Peter, James, John and Andrew are dumbfounded. Jesus casually says that not one stone will be left upon another, that all will be thrown down; so the disciples want to know when the Temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished. The Jews were very keen on signs.

The biblical experts seem more or less to agree that these two questions are separate from each other, although you could quite easily draw the conclusion that the destruction of the Temple might be the sign of what is to come, since it was a colossal building, with enormous stones, and represented a triumph in engineering and construction. It was already several hundred years old at the time of Jesus, having been begun by King Hezekiah and completed by Herod Great. A small part still exists today, the Western Wall, which can be seen and is used by Jews for their prayers. Perhaps some of you have been there and seen it, and maybe even prayed there.

So the destruction of such a building would seem to be a sign for the Jews that significant events were about to unfold. But when? Of course we have the benefit of hindsight, and we know that barely 40 years later the Temple was indeed utterly destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans who were fed up with the Jews constantly rebelling against their rule. But Jesus

seems to intend this statement about the Temple to be just an example of many other events to come, so the main thrust of verses 5-8 appears to be clear: the disciples are not to be led astray by various events into thinking that the End of the world is about to come. These verses are a warning against overenthusiasm. Such events must take place first, but they do not indicate that the present world order is about to come crashing down. When I was working in the City at Lloyd's insurance market, there was a man who ran a restaurant nearby carrying a sandwich board in the street outside: on one side were the words "the end is nigh", and on the other the words "but my restaurant is just round the corner".

But before saying these things about catastrophic events to come Jesus makes a few strange comments: "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say 'I am he!'" (the Greek literally means "I am"). As it is Jesus who is speaking these words, it's not quite clear what such people might be claiming: to be Jesus himself returning from the dead? to be divine beings? to be the true Messiah? or to be the Messiah's agent or representative? There is a similar warning in verses 21-23 of Chapter 13, which is much clearer about the existence of messianic claimants other than Jesus. Our reading today is a rather more obscure passage, which may simply indicate that the presence of false claimants was felt to be a real threat at that time.

So where does this leave us today? As we know all too well, wars and calamities have continued, especially now in Ukraine, Israel/Gaza/Lebanon, and Sudan. Another Remembrance Day has come and gone, when we have honoured those who lost their lives in conflicts of the 20th century and already in the 21st. Nothing much seems to have changed, two thousand years on, but that should not deflect us from pursuing the goals of the Kingdom of God which Jesus came to usher in. In a way, the readings from Daniel 12 (also appointed for today) and from the letter to the Hebrews are well chosen and more helpful in keeping us on track: Daniel prophesies that we shall be delivered to everlasting life and that

those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars, for ever. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of the new and living way which Jesus opened for us through the curtain, i.e. through his death on the cross, so that our hearts may be sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. We are encouraged to provoke one another to love and good deeds, to continue to meet together, encouraging one another as we see the Day approaching.

I see the Day (written with a capital D) as representing the Kingdom of God in the here and now, not as something which lies a long way off. It lies in the small print of our daily lives, which are the raw material of our prayers. The way we behave towards each other, the way we keep our children and vulnerable adults safe, in all the different parts of our lives, working for peace and justice corporately and individually, this way is the litmus test of our faith in Jesus Christ, and we thank the Archbishop of Canterbury for his example, both recently and over the past 12 years.

So as we approach the Lord's table with a true heart, let us once more renew and refresh ourselves for our service in his world, in this world which he has given us in order to show the fruits of our faith, by accepting his body and his blood as he commanded us to do.

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