

ADVENT SUNDAY

In Luke's gospel chapter 21: ³³*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

A couple of weeks ago we talked in the sermon time about apocalyptic literature and the important part that it played in the Bible. You will remember, but just in case you don't I'll tell you, that apocalyptic writing is about revealing to certain privileged people what is going to happen at the end of time.

This passage we read this morning from Luke's gospel is often called the Little Apocalypse. Standing in the Temple, not long before the end of his ministry, Jesus has very strange things to say about the end of time.

²⁵*“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*
Luke 21

Of course in Jesus' day people were very interested in what happened at the end of time – much more so than they are today. Because life was very rough – not two hundred years since the Maccabean Revolt had led to a massive number of deaths, and now life in Roman occupation was harsh and personally dangerous. It has always been true that the harder life is the more people long for the knowledge of something entirely beyond the present pains of life. Look, for example, at the well-documented rise in interest in spiritualism that followed the First World War.

But in our rational lives, what point is there – you would think – in worrying about the end of time. These are things well beyond our capacity to address intellectually. In spite of the Large Hadron Collider sending its particles dashing through underground tunnels between Switzerland and France, looking for a clue as to where we all started in the Big Bang – in spite of our cleverness any attempt at clarity about the beginning or end of time seems pretty futile. After all, scientists tell us that if the whole history of time was represented by the length of a football pitch – then the whole of human history would be less than the thickness of a single blade of grass.

So what is Jesus talking about here? Well, I think the first thing is to accept that these words have little to do with a time line. Jesus is not trying to give us a clue about the progress of clocks and calendars. These prognostications are about something far more important – and they are to do with God and the relationship of God to a creation that includes us. When Jesus says: ³³*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away* – it is to guarantee to us two important things. This world won't last forever! I guess we knew that! But the love of God through Jesus will!

The lesson reminds us that bad things happen. In fact, bad things happen to good people. A policeman doing his duty is swept away in flood waters. A baby of 18 months is sexually abused and the pictures posted on the internet. More soldiers and innocent bystanders die in Afghanistan. Property developers in Dubai overreach themselves, banks make selfish choices, and pensioners face a poorer life. Babies die and cancer kills, but bad things are never the final word.

And we have to admit that this time of Advent is all very sombre in church – purple predominates, the hymns are in places very minor and muted. They talk about being “burdened with heavy loads.” But today also we light the first candle in a four-week

journey through the darkness of an Advent season. The Christmas lights outside may already be lit – even the lights on the Norwegian Tree on the Mound have been switched on on Thursday night there. But counter-culturally, almost, the church has to go in the opposite direction. At the very moment when everyone else is being pointed towards Christmas. At the very moment when people are asking each other, “have you got all your presents bought” we are being brought into the presence of the chaos of the cosmos, the place where bad things happen to good people. We are being reminded that the world of tinsel, warmth and chestnuts roasting by the open fire is also a world of terror and grinding sadness.

Advent, you see, is the time for us to wait – and to wait with a purpose. We wait in danger, we wait in places that are surrounded by dark shadows, big and important fears – but we are waiting, nevertheless, with eyes looking up.

What are the questions of this season? “What’s about to happen?” “What will I get for Christmas?” “Will Santa be good to me?” “Will there be enough food” “Will the turkey turn out nicely”

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“Will God’s promise be fulfilled?” Yes, it will! For those who wait among the danger-filled days of living the true Christmas will be a time of small wonders and simple graces.

And so even though bad things happen to good people, we live with the hope and the conviction that God is in charge, and so in the meantime, we turn to Jesus in order to learn how to live in this darkness--how to wait, how to stay alert, how to live in preparation for the moment when we will be needed to bring creation to completion. Because, as the people of God, for better or worse, weak, feeble and wrong-headed though we may be, we are the ones who bear Christ's hope for the world. Hope cannot be bought and wrapped and put under a Christmas tree.

But isn’t it just right that this journey we begin today will take us from terrible images of the end of time to a manger in Bethlehem? Only such a transformation could be shocking enough to work. We light our candles because while the powers of evil are real and terrible, they are not permanent. They are not permanent. They will pass away. But Jesus’ words will not pass away.

What will last is God’s purpose for us – a vision which at the end will triumph over all our hurts and woes in a kingdom of justice and peace – when we at the last – ransomed, healed, restored and forgiven – come into the presence of our loving God. And that is why “Advent”!