

Sermon - 16/11/25

Luke 21: 5-19 - 'The End of the Age'

Jesus said, "Stand firm and you will win life." (Luke 21:19)

We are drawing towards the end of the annual cycle of readings in the church's calendar which we have been following this year in the Gospel of Luke - having celebrated the birth of Jesus at Christmas, we have moved through the season of Epiphany exploring how Christ was first revealed to the world; entering into the suffering of Jesus during Lent and Holy Week we have pondered the significance and the power of His death and resurrection (although that is something that is at the heart of our worship every Sunday). Following the story of Christ's return to His Father's side we have celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit and then over the summer and autumn so far we have explored the teaching of Jesus about what it means to live in the Kingdom of God and to keep in step with the Spirit. In the closing weeks of the lectionary we are brought to consider the end of all things, as in our reading this morning, and the final enthronement of Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords at the culmination of all things that will be our theme next week, the last Sunday before the beginning of Advent.

The whole subject of the end of the age is one that few people are terribly keen to think about. Most people are quick to run away from any conversation about the fact that our own life here will one day come to an end, so to contemplate the coming to an end not only of the world as we know it but indeed of the whole physically created universe is something that is virtually impossible to get our heads around. It is considered a topic for weirdos and nutcases and it immediately brings to mind images of a sullen prophet of doom or a lonely figure wearing a sandwich board proclaiming The End of the World is Nigh or a dangerous cult leader taking their deluded followers out into a secret wilderness place to await a heavenly rescue from the cataclysm that will befall the world on some predicted date.

You can count me amongst the weirdos and nutcases if you like but I am called to preach the whole counsel of God, including unsettling apocalyptic passages like this morning's reading and I wouldn't be doing you any favours if I skipped over them in favour of something easier to hear.

The scene is the Temple in Jerusalem during the last week of Jesus' life on earth. He and His disciples have been there a couple of days and we have to remember that for some of the Galileans it may have been the first time they had ever seen the place. Little wonder they are overawed by the place - its huge stones and the signs of a nation's devotion to their Creator must have stirred their faith. Yet Jesus brings them right back down to earth by telling them that a time would come when not one of the huge stones

would remain. 'Teacher, they ask, When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?' (v.7)

That is the cue for Jesus to speak not only about events that would happen a generation later when the Temple would be razed to the ground by the Romans in AD70 in response to a Jewish uprising, but also about the greater cataclysm that will come upon the whole world when God will bring in a new heaven and a new earth. And what He has to say is as fresh for us today as it was for His first disciples 2000 years ago because in human terms what goes around comes around and there is nothing new under the sun. The uncertainties that the first disciples faced in their day are just the same as those we face today as we listen to the news bulletins and as we face the challenges of everyday living.

The first matter Jesus mentions cannot be emphasised enough. "Watch out that you are not deceived," He says. (v.8) Goodness, you would think that 'fake news' was a new phenomenon. Whether it is a wacky religious cult leader or a self-assured statesman or a trusted international news organisation, we need to be very careful who we trust. There are all kinds of people out there claiming to have the answers. Some of them proclaim a date for the end of the world, some of them use other methods to persuade people of their messianic credentials. Not all claim to be Christ in the sense that they profess to be the fulfilment of scriptural prophecies but those individuals or institutions who demand the same kind of unquestioning faith and loyalty are as good as usurping the place that rightfully belongs to Jesus alone. Jesus says, 'Do not follow them.' Jesus continues to say to His disciples, 'Follow me.'

The second matter that Jesus raises concerns our reactions to upheavals in the world, whether they be natural or man-made. "When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened." (v.9) "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places and fearful events and great signs from heaven." (vv.10-11) The world is constantly rocked by such things. These things *must* happen - they are all part of a fallen and broken world. Human beings are in revolt against God - wars and upheavals are a consequence of that revolt. They *are* signs that an end is coming but the end will not come right away. Jesus says, 'Do not be frightened.' Jesus continues to say to His disciples, 'Put your trust in God; trust also in me.'

And thirdly, Jesus speaks to His disciples about the persecution that will come to all who follow Him because we belong to God's coming Kingdom rather than to this present world. Right from the beginning of the Church's life the early Christians faced opposition. The New Testament is full of it - the Church in Jerusalem was met with constant trouble from the Jewish authorities and as the message of the Gospel began to spread across the Gentile world the apostles and the believers who constituted the first congregations across the Roman Empire and beyond received regular floggings and

even death. Again, down through the ages Christians in every part of the world have faced persecution and far from getting better there have in fact been more martyrs in the last hundred years than in all the preceding centuries put together. Jesus' message to those who face opposition for their faith is this: 'Do not worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves, for I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict' (v.14-15) Jesus continues to say to His disciples, 'Stand firm and you will win life.'

Our world is an unsettling place to live. There are many voices threatening to deceive us and it can be hard to discern the truth when even trusted sources let us down. There is much to make us anxious and we can easily be overwhelmed by the prospect of war or economic collapse or climate catastrophe. There are times when it may not seem worth going against the spirit of the age and holding to an otherworldly Gospel. In the midst of all that puzzles us hear the voice of Jesus this morning: 'Watch out that you are not deceived... Do not be frightened... Make up your mind not to worry... Stand firm and you will live.'

That was the message Jesus gave to His first hesitant followers just days before He was led to the Cross and it is the same message He gives to us today. We may find it very hard to see, because God's ways are not our ways and neither are His thoughts our thoughts, but it is the crucified One who is enthroned on high and who has all things in His hands, and while those who follow the world's paths lead us into greater deception, greater conflict and greater revolt against the ways of God, we have the opportunity to forge a different way, a better way, a way that does for the least of God's children what we would do for God's Son, feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty a drink, inviting in the stranger, clothing the naked, looking after the sick, visiting the prisoner. Tell me that's not a better way to live. Tell me that won't build a better world. And then tell me this is not an important message to share however uncomfortable it may make us feel.

"Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away." (Luke 21:33) Jesus said: 'Stand firm and you will live.' (Luke 21:19)