

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

November 17th 2019 - Trinity 22

Not everything Jesus has to say is immediately comforting, or heart-warming or easy to hear. As we head towards and through the season of Advent, the Church does encourage us to face some of the deep and dark aspects of the reality of things. The traditional themes of Advent itself are death, judgement, heaven and hell.

Still, there is another, over-arching theme, which we make rather powerfully manifest here on Advent Sunday, in our Procession: which is to say, 'light out of darkness'. In that service we hear words and music which unfold that theme, but also enact it in the procession of light through a darkened space. We can dare to face the tough stuff because there is an unquenchable brightness ahead of us. In terms rather literal, in terms of the Church calendar, that means Christmas. In terms less literal, that means that the meaning of Christmas is the fire in the light which draws us on, out of the darkness (ultimately). The coming of Jesus, the coming of God-as-human, is the energy of our hope. As Malachi glimpsed, he is the *Sun of Righteousness, risen with healing in his wings*.

And so the Church bids us hear Jesus talking about the future. When he does, it can be some of the hardest of his teaching for us to understand. This might be because the language is so mystifying, poetic, frightening. Not surprisingly it has lent itself to unhelpfully feverish and speculative use, especially by what you might call the millenarian sort of Christian: those who read these texts and go all Nostradamus. That combination of literalism and bloodthirsty relish is not very edifying.

It's important to remember that one of the many genres found in the Bible is that poetic, visionary speech which we call 'apocalyptic'. This means 'hidden' or 'secret', and so is about the prophetic revelation of the inner meaning of things: and this is usually done in terms of things which are to come, the 'end times'. That is why the word has taken on its modern meaning, suggesting catastrophe and destruction. In its biblical usage, the language can sound almost dream-like – even sometimes nightmarish - in its rich, imaginative mysteriousness. The last book of the Bible, sometimes called The Apocalypse, the last book the Church chose to call canonical, is the apotheosis of such writing; but it has juicy antecedents in the Old Testament, in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel.

The accounts we have of Jesus talking in this way vary somewhat from gospel to gospel. In Luke 21, part of which we just heard, Jesus speaks about the future, but not just in what you might call full-fat apocalyptic mode. In fact that happens later in the chapter, after today's passage. That's about what he calls the 'coming of the Son of Man'. He seems to be talking about some cataclysmic event which lies in the future, a climactic time of divine interruption and fulfilment: but in the midst of the rich language there is no hint about actual timing. The essence of it seems to be: be ready, because something of almost-inexpressible magnitude is on its way.

In the verses which make up today's gospel reading, however, Jesus is telling his disciples something more specific. Two things, actually: one is what lies in store for the Temple, the other, what lies in store for them. By the time Luke's gospel was being read out, both of these were known, actual sets of events.

One was the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. This happened in the year 70, after four years of Jewish rebellion. There was a four-month-long siege, at the end of which the Romans burned and destroyed the Temple, smashed up the city and killed or enslaved a huge number of people. This was one of the most traumatic events in all Jewish history.

So when the disciples were marvelling at the Temple's beauty and wealth, Jesus in straightforward prophetic mode was able to say, 'this will all go, it will all be utterly thrown down'. The hearers of Luke's gospel knew that he had been right, and so could be assured of his prophetic insight. But they also probably knew the subtext. For all his reverence for the Jewish Law and the ritual requirements of Temple worship, Jesus was much less interested in outward observance than he was in the inner dispositions of the heart. His repeated rebuttal of hypocritical, hard-hearted religious leaders tells us that.

In addition, we hear Jesus in the other gospels appearing to talk about the physical Temple, but actually talking about himself. After throwing the money-changers out of the Temple in John's gospel, Jesus says *destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*. After his resurrection, his disciples twigged what he had meant. And so the focal point of relationship with God, the ultimate locus of our worshipping life is Jesus, not a building.

The second specific prophecy Jesus was offering was that his followers would face persecution: arrest, betrayal, even death. Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, shows this happening. And the hearers of Luke's gospel knew that Jesus had been right: he was a true prophet. That then gave them powerful grounds to believe what he had to say about the things which hadn't yet happened: the much more mysterious end-of-days things.

We too can share the conviction of those who first heard Luke's gospel, that Jesus had uniquely genuine prophetic insight. We know that following him can take us to some dark places – and in some dark places in the world that means real danger. We also believe that something extraordinary awaits us, ultimately. We can dare to believe that not only has the coming of Christ been the coming of a light which banishes the darkness: but also that that light will accompany us through whatever life has to throw at us. And, that it presages and prepares us for the final irruption of divine light into this world, whenever that is and whatever it looks like. Such an event, such a time is beyond human description, but we do our best with apocalyptic language. We should treat that language with care and hopeful humility. It's not some version of a fantasy genre which happens to be true. It is a genre of its own, grappling imaginatively with the indescribable.

We just have to be ready, because something of almost-inexpressible magnitude is on its way. And our hope is that it will be about light and healing and, of course, love.