



13th November 2016

Psalm 98

Luke 21.5-19

The Irresistibility of Love

Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.

It's been quite a week as we have watched the democratic process unfold the other side of The Pond. This year's Presidential Election has been like no other and many are wondering what the world is going to feel like after January 20th and the inauguration of America's 45th national leader.

Uncertainty about the future is nothing new and worries about tomorrow can trouble any generation. Indeed, such anxieties were probably behind a kind of literature we sometimes encounter in the bible called 'Apocalyptic'. You'll find it in books like Daniel and Revelation and it also flavours today's lectionary reading from Luke. This genre of storytelling and word painting pondered the culmination of history and wondered how things might pan out – and in the process employed dramatic and overblown imagery just as intricate as anything from Tolkien's Lord of The Rings.

In today's passage, we focus on a much-cherished icon – the Temple in Jerusalem. But the point is surely this – Luke writes his gospel around AD85 and this beloved House of God was ransacked and destroyed in AD70 by a hostile Roman army. So, although Luke writes this part of chapter 21 in the style of prophesy – looking forward, in reality this is a looking back – it's actually in part both a reflection and an explanation of why this tragedy might have come about.

Of all the gospel writers, we get the impression that Luke was the fondest of the Temple. He emphasises the practice of Jesus teaching in its courts and the habit of members of the early Church attending its daily times of prayer.

Indeed, this passage comes immediately after that touching description of the elderly woman giving her small offering into the temple coffers. It's as if Luke is praising her faithfulness and love of this wonderful building and all it stood for and contrasting that with the official high priestly leadership of the Temple which Luke obviously considers tarnished and corrupt.

Buildings can speak, even ruined ones.

What did Luke and his contemporaries feel as, just like Nehemiah's generation,

they looked at the rubble which had once been the most cherished and respected building in the land?

It's a tragedy when one nation seeks to destroy the icons or traditions of another in a time of war or as an act of terrorism.

Part of this country's collective memory from World War II is the bombing of Coventry and the destruction of its cathedral in 1940 – an inverse memory of the one held by the people of Dresden.

In a Christmas Day broadcast from the ruins of Coventry Cathedral in 1940 Provost Howard made a commitment not to revenge, but to forgiveness.

So began the Cathedral's Community of The Cross of Nails which today works in over 40 countries advocating reconciliation.

And as magnificent as the great architect Basil Spence's new cathedral is nothing speaks with deeper eloquence than the inscription on the altar on the ruins of the Medieval one: Father Forgive.

Buildings speak and in today's passage Luke seems to be contemplating what the ruins of the Temple might be saying to his time and generation.

The Temple – in both its glory and destruction - figures highly in today's reading.

So is it, to coin a phrase, Apocalypse Now? In our bibles, this chapter of Luke's gospel is even entitled 'Warnings about the end'. Indeed, dissect today's verses and there is the hint that the Temple won't last much longer, that wars and rumours of wars will abound and that persecution on the grounds of faith is surely on its way. And it's true that eventually all of these things happened.

Yet throughout history people have sometimes been far too quick to see natural disasters or human tragedies as God's judgement.

Earlier this year David Jenkins, a onetime Bishop of Durham died. He was the quick speaking prelate who said on the radio what is usually discussed behind closed doors in Theological College classrooms – he spoke with honesty about his struggle with ideas such as the Virgin Birth or Resurrection. Before his enthronement at Durham he was ordained Bishop at a service in York Minster and later that week the cathedral was struck by lightning and partially destroyed – and it wasn't just the Daily Mail that concluded that this was obviously God's judgement against a bishop who dared share his doubts and ask questions.

Chapter 21 is not the cheeriest one in Luke's gospel.

So, maybe we could just read it as a warning issued in the Apocalyptic tradition.

Yet some commentators are not too sure and say perhaps it just possible that Jesus was actually playing with this genre. In other words, he was using the language of apocalypse but actually saying 'Don't panic' – these things are not necessarily going to happen any time soon – and even if they do you will be given strength to get through them one day at a time.

So Luke attributes these words to Jesus: Take care you are not misled – many will come claiming my name – do not follow them.

It's as if Jesus is saying there will always be wars and the rumours of wars – but that doesn't mean the end is nigh – that's life, that's the world in which we live – and that's the world in which we are called to ground our faith and live with trust.

The Australian commentator Bill Loader makes the point that all of us, even religious people – perhaps especially religious people, can be panicked into irrationality.

So, perhaps Jesus is using the Apocalyptic style of Luke 21 subversively, using the language but actually saying life is going to go on and these are not the end times. And if hardship comes our way, and if suffering becomes part of the story of the Christian Church, then my followers will be strengthened and enabled to get through that hardship and face that suffering.

Perhaps the most precious words of today's passage are these: I myself will give you such words and wisdom as no opponent can resist or refute.

So let's put the Jesus story back into today's passage. Let's move to that final week of his life which must have seemed like his very own personal apocalypse.

Condemned by the Sanhedrin, sentenced by Pilate, crucified by soldiers meant that initially even his closest followers thought the Jesus story had petered out with irretrievable tragedy.

Yet why, 2000 years later do we still wear crosses and celebrate Communion?

Isn't it because actually upon the cross Jesus did give us such words and wisdom as no opponent can resist or refute – the words, now inscribed in a bombed-out Midlands Cathedral: Father Forgive.

Here is what one bible commentator says who I read this week: There is something irresistible about love, even when it is crucified.

Words of love and words of peace are something to cherish and celebrate on a day such as this. And words are powerful, and words change hearts and inspire movements and bless neighbours.

There is something irresistible about love, even when it is crucified.

The book and the film, *The Railway Man*, which charts the long and slow journey of Eric Lomax, a onetime prisoner of war on the Burma Railway, in meeting up with his former torturer – a meeting that eventually lead to real and profound reconciliation – is neither an easy read nor a comfortable watch but it is immensely inspirational – and maybe even irresistible. To see how the human spirit can rise above understandable resentments and find the courage to embrace an enemy so that the failures of the past need not hijack the potential of the future.

Today as poppies are worn and wreaths are laid, as personal memories come once more to the surface or shared story telling brings our community together – we not only remember with gratitude those who paid the greatest cost – we also pray for peace, seek and offer forgiveness and we do all this because the shadow of the cross of Jesus rests upon us and once more we affirm there truly is something irresistible about love, even when it is crucified.

This morning's reading asks us to stay in touch with these deep truths and to listen to calm voices and take the long view trusting in Jesus who has said: I myself will give you such words and wisdom as no opponent can resist or refuse.

So, at the end of week when it feels like the world has been changed for ever and on a Sunday when we remember with deep gratitude those who gave so much to preserve the freedoms we still enjoy - what of the future? And how might any of us step into tomorrow?

Surely the message of today's passage – once we have deciphered and dealt with its apocalyptic imagery is this: live as people of hope placing your trust in a God of love.

For God's word from the cross is 'forgive'.

That irresistibility of love is surely why, when called before a firing squad in 1945 Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer left his cell saying: For me this is not the end, but the beginning.

May such hope be the hallmark of all our tomorrows in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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