

The End is Nigh?

A sermon on Sunday 18th November 2018 at All Saints Church Wokingham by

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Some of you know that once or twice a month I drive a Charity Bus. It's for the over 70s but the average age is normally in the high 80s. We take them on day trips and its great fun, certainly the conversations can be very lively. A couple of weeks ago, I was talking to one of the passengers while we were waiting for others to join us. We chatted in that sort of scattergun conversation that often occurs between two people who don't really know much about each other and are looking for some sort of common ground. So, I think we were talking about singing and that lead on to Choirs then Church Choirs and then..... foolishly, I admitted I was a Lay Preacher. Well that did it! "Ah ha" he said. There was one of those long thoughtful pauses. "Lay Preacher eh?" Another pause. This was worrying. I tried to manage the silence by pretending to be busy seeing if the other passengers were arriving. But I knew that it wouldn't work. "So" he said finally, with that smugness that you know precedes some sort of profound question that you won't be able to answer. "Do you believe we are in the End Times? Is the world about to end? Is the apocalypse about to happen because the signs are all there!"

Well, I wasn't expecting that one but having admitted to being a preacher he probably thought I would have some sort of insider information. But how can you answer that objectively? What do you base your response on? It's hardly a 'yes/No' answer is it? Well, I assume that the thoughtful look on my face (or was it just panic) wasn't good enough for my passenger who took my hesitation as his cue to launch into a whole series of apocalyptic prophecies from the Old Testament (some of which I'd never heard of) before linking them with the state of the world today; the tension between the superpowers; the collapse of financial institutions and the natural disasters occurring all over the world. He would have gone on but I'd finally thought of my answer.

"well" I said confidently, "the other passengers are here!"

On reflection, the question isn't unreasonable it's just not the right one. Every communion service we declare "Great is the mystery of faith, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again". What we don't say and what was probably behind my passenger's question, is 'When?' When will Christ come again? But I guess it wouldn't be faith if we knew when. We have nevertheless had 2000 years of asking that very question and although there has been no shortage of people ready to predict the imminence of the second coming, we are still here. And here we have a real dichotomy. Jesus' return is a serious tenet of our faith and yet how do we balance it against the distractions of our everyday lives. Do we give it much thought and how

seriously do we rate the possibility? Are we actually capable of believing that Jesus will return in our lifetime and I'm not trying to be facetious, I just think it's a really difficult question.

If you go up to London, just outside Victoria station, there is a large pedestrian island at the junction of several roads to allow the large volume of commuters to head off in their various directions. Almost every time I've been there, some form of evangelistic preacher has set up in the middle of the island equipped with microphone and bible, haranguing the pedestrians as they rush by. Berating them with dire threats that 'the end is nigh' and the need for repentance – the punishments for not repenting sometimes more graphically described than other times, but always very much 'in your face'. Watching the reaction of the crowds as interesting – its like the parting of the waters as they merge together, a river flowing around but away from the preacher leaving a large empty circle around him. I've done it myself. I didn't want to get involved in this guy's vehemence or extremism not to mention the fact that the subject matter is too uncomfortable. I don't want to hear it as I rush past, I certainly don't want to catch his eye and get singled out for special treatment – I'm sorry, I'm just too busy for the world to end now!

But predicting the apocalypse, such as in today's reading, is commonplace throughout Jewish history and Old testament scripture. Isaiah (13.13 & 14.30) predicts earthquakes and famine and Esdras in the Apocrypha foretells wars and devastation. But there is a difference between apocalyptic scripture and our evangelist on the street, and this particularly applies to today's reading.

Such scriptural predictions follow a standard feature where the authors of the text position the prediction as coming from a figure in the past so that what is ostensibly a prediction of what is to come, is often something that is happening or has already happened. This use of hindsight is a common literary device in scripture used to add credence to the message and other words of the prophet; because if they've got this one right, everything else they say is probably also right. This is almost certainly the case in today's reading. Mark was writing c 70 AD or CE and although Jesus appears to be looking forward, it is believed by scholars that Mark was referring to what had already happened i.e. the great civil unrest of 68-69 in the Empire and the destructive earthquakes reported at that time. He may even have witnessed and was thereby referencing the actual destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Given the climate of political and religious persecution that Mark was experiencing, he would almost certainly have understood this to be God's punishment for Israel's failure to respond to the word.

This use of hindsight should not however serve to dampen down the story, but we do well to remember that when we read the gospels the writers were addressing specific audiences and they had specific agendas. Their writings reflect the messages they wished to impart. Mark, for example, was experiencing serious competition from the many false Messiahs seeking to

capitalise on Jesus' charisma and some even claiming to be Jesus returned from the dead. It is not surprising therefore, that his writing reflects what was occurring both in the present as well as the past. Jesus' warnings were actually being realised at the time of writing. Indeed, it is one of the challenges of Chapter 13 to determine when or where Mark is referencing the past, present or future. At one point (and this is why today's extract should not be read in isolation), Jesus is exhorting everybody to be vigilant and ready because the End may come at any time. But then later in the chapter he plays this down urging the disciples not to get too excited and believe that the End is imminent when they witness certain signs.

And this is where I started. Is the end coming? Yes. When? No-one knows. Is it imminent? Maybe..... or maybe not.

Reflecting on my conversation with the bus passenger the thing to take out of it is not the question "is the End imminent?" because we can't do much about that. But maybe we would be better placed to reflect on whether we would be ready and prepared in the eyes of God if it did happen tomorrow. And if you read the rest of Chapter 13, you'll see that Jesus is urging the disciples to be prepared, to face the persecution, to stand up for their faith and to lead lives that follow his example and teaching. Above all in the final verse he says: "And what I have to say to you say to all: Keep awake". (13.37). And that is an interesting thought.

As always, there is possibly another way of looking at this. We've probably all used the phrase "its going to get a lot worse before it gets better". I can think of at least one current political event to which that definitely applies. But maybe Jesus is talking about our own situation. When the disciples openly admire the Temple building Jesus curtly dismisses their comments and later predicts its destruction. Material things that we aspire to or want to possess often drain our energy, focus and resources. Jesus may well have been pointing us at our own material mentality. Our society does in many ways reflect this old order. If we look at the homeless, the hungry, the increase in domestic and civil violence. Are we not increasingly alarmed at the widening gap between those that have and those that don't, the increasing reliance on charities, foodbanks and churches to provide help support and succour to those in need? And for many it is getting steadily worse. It is a sad reflection on the society we have created. As a colleague said at a recent PCC meeting, "I almost feel guilty because I can't give to all the charities and good causes that ask me for money". I don't believe he is alone in feeling this way. For many it probably feels like it can't get any worse. But it may be that Jesus' words can offer hope of better things to come and for some that will be the only lifeline left to hold onto. Tearing down the temple could be synonymous with breaking down the inequalities, victimisation and exploitation. It is not about the building, it is about leading Christlike lives and using our resources to help build that better place for everyone.

Now, there may be a few of you now thinking how does CC2020 fit into this and why is a member of the CC2020 Committee advocating 'tearing down the temple!'. And this is the fine line where prayer and looking for God's direction before doing something becomes so important because it has helped to confirm and develop our vision for CC2020: to provide a Church for today fit for tomorrow. This means not standing still. It means not watching our church numbers dwindle. It means not under utilising the wonderful resource we have been given. Yes, there will be a financial implication, and some would justifiably argue that that money could be used to help the poor and marginalised, but all of our plans and deliberations have been about sustainability, not short-term fixes. We are creating a welcoming community space. A space where the Church becomes a hub for all members of our town and wider community to meet, to use, to find support, to get help as well as enjoying the wider community activities like concerts, exhibitions, meetings. Of course, it will always be our priority to provide a place to worship and pray, that is why we exist. But it is hoped that the more people that come through the door, the Christian ethos of the church and our congregation, the environment of love and spirituality, will positively influence the way our community engages and supports each other. To do this we need a building suitable to achieve this. So, in answer to my own question, "no, we must not get hung up on the building for the building's sake, but we must equally provide an environment that will serve the existing congregation whilst opening our doors to welcome more people to come in and join with us in serving the community. (Wow that was almost political!)

And whilst I'm on the subject, there will be a presentation in the Cornerstone after the 0930 and 1100 services to show off the latest plans and designs for the building. It should only take about 15 minutes and we encourage everyone to take the chance to see the proposals and ask questions. We are still looking to go for planning permission in December so please have a look.

And finally, in case you thought I'd forgotten, today is 'Giving Sunday. It is a time to celebrate the gifts of God and the generosity of all at All Saints. And assuming the second coming doesn't start in the next 15 minutes, I believe there may even be a chocolate for you on the way out - Cadbury's celebrations of course.

Amen.