

## **SERMON: Sunday – 13 November 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

Isaiah 65:17-25

Luke 21:5-19

Writing about faith and the Christian Church in 2022 Scotland is to write with the knowledge that a vast majority of one's fellow citizens have a very different view of God, if they have one at all. Churches in this part of the world have spent the last couple of decades searching for an answer, a resolution to the decline in numbers of members and worshipers.

We have written reports, books, pamphlets, run seminars and retreats. We have spent significant amounts of time and energy in searching for local, regional, and national solutions to this change in our circumstances.

Many have tried changing the time of worship, changing the style, incorporating different types of music, trying to make the welcome one receives at the door more, well, welcoming. For some this has extended to how we talk about our faith, and fear of offending often sets in. Fear of talking about the events of the day, of challenging what is happening in our governments, of speaking about what is happening in our communities, even what is happening within our churches. Is this, however, what Jesus calls us to do?

Our reading this week, with its apocalyptic tones, and seeming shift in focus from the Temple being a generally positive place, to one that must be destroyed, may sound odd to our ears, and it should be read in the context of the whole Gospel. Indeed, we might ask ourselves, who is this written for? Are these the historical words of Jesus? Or are they words gleaned from Jesus, but amassed for the community around Luke? We cannot know. Nevertheless, they can speak to us today.

There is hope in these words, because the message that Jesus imparts, particularly in verses 7-11, is one of steadfastness, of perseverance, of staying grounded and calm, even though the world around may seem to be in disarray. He offers a warning against false prophets, no matter how close they may be to us, even if those closest to us are determined that we should follow the popular view.

Jesus tells us to resist, to stay true to him and his teaching, even though that may not come with the kind of instant gratification or easy answers that others might offer, supposedly in his name.

Jesus, in this passage, speaks clearly about the difficulties that lie ahead for all those who truly wish to follow him. He does not say that there will be

excellent coffee, top of the range biscuits, he doesn't even say come with me and you will really enjoy yourself and get to sing only your favourites hymns! No, he is more honest than that. He tells his disciples and us, that life is hard, and it will be hard. But the hope comes through his proclamation, that in the end, God is and will be with us. Even in death, not a hair on our heads will perish.

Not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life (18-19).

Maybe it is time for us to pause and reflect on passages such as this one from Luke to consider what it really means for the church to be missional in the twenty first century. Maybe it is time for those trying to figure out how to get more people engaged, to think about how they go about it. Are they being offered transient, shallow promises of a good time, or easy answers to their life's problems? Or are they being offered truth, the hard, but necessary truth, as Jesus offers his disciples?

Filled with admiration for the grandness of the magnificently rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, the disciples would've loved Jesus to have agreed with them and said things like, "yeah, it's amazing isn't it? And they tell me Herod paid for it all. Maybe he's not such a bad guy after all."

But no. He didn't say those things. He didn't say things to go along with the crowd or to prove his popularity. He didn't flinch from the difficult conversations or shrink back from saying what needed to be said - the truth in love.

Instead he pointed his followers to where faith should be placed - in the God for whom no temple can be built but who instead chooses to build his temple in hearts willing to take him at his word.

Make up your mind not to 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 (14-15).

In a conflict ridden world of wars and rumours of wars, where everyone stands to be affected and in which there are no winners whilst the fight rages on; how much we need the words and the wisdom that Jesus offers.

I want to finish by saying something about white poppies which are produced by the Peace Pledge Union, a union of people who have taken the peace pledge, declaring their refusal to co-operate with war and their desire to work against the causes of war. Whilst they say the following about white poppies I fully acknowledge that many people believe the same things irrespective of what colour of poppy they wear or indeed whether they chose to wear one at all:

White poppies are worn every year by thousands of people across the UK and beyond. They were first produced in the aftermath of the First World War, to hold on to the key message of remembrance, 'never again'. They stand for three things.

(1) For **remembrance of all victims of all wars**. This includes wars still being fought in Ukraine, Yemen and many other places around the world. It includes people of all nationalities. It includes both civilians and members of armed forces.

In wearing white poppies, we remember all those killed in war, all those wounded in body or mind, the millions who have been made sick or homeless by war and the families and communities torn apart. We also remember those killed or imprisoned for refusing to fight and for resisting war.

(2) Secondly, the white poppy **challenges attempts to glorify or celebrate war**. It encourages people to stand up for peace and resist the causes of war and militarism today.

White poppies draw attention to the human cost of war, highlighting the urgency of our struggle for peace. They remind us that resistance to war and militarism must continue the year round.

(3) And thirdly, white poppies symbolise **a commitment to peace** and to finding non-violent solutions to conflicts. In this way they reassert the original message of remembrance, 'never again'.

Through economic reliance on arms sales, sky rocketing military spending, investment in nuclear weapons and support for ongoing wars, governments around the world contribute significantly to war and militarism. The best way to respect the victims of war is to work to prevent war in the present and future being prepared to face up to the underlying causes of warfare, such as poverty, inequality and competition over resources. A temporary absence of violence is not enough. Peace is much deeper and broader than that, requiring major social changes to allow us to live more co-operatively.

Remembrance is difficult work;  
and yet it is important work.  
The present is shaped by the past,  
and the future is shaped by our present.  
Wars of past, present and future  
are to be regretted or remembered  
but never to be celebrated.

Instead we are to celebrate the lives  
of those who served and are lost to us,  
who strove for peace  
and whose legacy is worth honouring.  
And to pray for an end to all wars,  
for peace to cover the world;  
to remember that war is not God's work,  
God is love not hate.  
God is peace not conflict.  
God is justice not conquest.  
God is our hope and our joy.  
Amen.