

BACKGROUND: 29 November 2015 – Rev Dr Brenda Robson

Luke 21: 25 – 36

This is the first Sunday in Advent. It is the start of the new church year. Andre generally follows the lectionary in choosing readings each week. The lectionary follows a three year cycle, years A, B and C and we are starting year C today. In the past year, most of our gospel readings came from Mark. This year they will come from Luke.

Luke gives one of the longer accounts of Jesus' birth and then follows his life. Luke's aim is to encourage mission and he went on to write the book of Acts about the early church.

Our reading from Luke 21 is sometimes called the Little Apocalypse. All of creation reflects the difficulties of the world.

Sun, moon and stars are all in flux.

The powers of the world are in anguish and perplexed.

The inner world of people will be in turmoil, they will hear the roaring of the sea and people will faint through terror and apprehension. A more accurate translation of the word "faint" here would be to "breathe out life" – perhaps meaning to gasp or even to breathe out completely and die.

The Jews would understand what Jesus was saying about the roaring seas and tossing waves. In the beginning the creator God brought order out of chaos and made human life possible but the people lived in fear that if God was not happy with them, then he could allow chaos to reign again.

Then, they will see the son of man coming in a cloud with power and glory. These words come from Daniel 7 : 13 – "like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven..."

In an apocalyptic situation when the world seems to be coming apart, most people would keep their heads down and run for cover. But Jesus says rather "Stand up and lift up your heads!"

Stay on the alert and watch for signs because the kingdom of God is near.

Luke recognises that people can't always handle the uncertainties of life and they turn to excess and drink and distractions. The word used for excess here actually just means "hung over" after getting drunk! When Luther became depressed because he felt that he kept on sinning even when he tried not to, he said that when depressed, we should drink more beer! Luke warns against this!

For all of us, at some time, there will be a shaking of our foundations when the unexpected and the difficult thing happens. Jesus said to expect it : "For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth."

But through watchfulness and prayer, we will come through the trials and be able to stand before the Son of Man. The verb to stand here is a passive infinitive – it should read "You will be stood before the Son of Man." You don't do the standing. You will be stood. Jesus will raise you up before him and so, in his power, you will be stood.

The apocalypse is not bad news but good news. In spite of every care, anxiety, worry and trouble, of which there are many each and every day, God is still in charge and he will raise us up!

I think it sometimes helps to hear the reading from The Message, a modern version of the bible, not a translation. It says –

Luke 21:25-36 - The Message

25-26 “It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

27-28 “And then—then!—they’ll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!”

29-33 He told them a story. “Look at a fig tree. Any tree for that matter. When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you that summer is right around the corner. The same here—when you see these things happen, you know God’s kingdom is about here. Don’t brush this off: I’m not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won’t wear out.

34-36 “But be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it’s going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don’t go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.”

SERMON: 29 November 2015 – Rev Dr Brenda Robson

Luke 21: 25 – 36

When I read the text for today I thought how relevant it is, how much it speaks to us today, in the present world events, the events now closer to home.

The first Sunday in Advent – should it not be a Christmassy theme? Something nice to reflect on and anticipate - the baby in the manger and the shepherds and the Kings? Like some kind of baby shower.

Instead the lectionary reading for this Sunday in Luke focuses on war and terror and destruction and horror.

War and terrorism grip the whole world today, the media focuses on little else.

Some might see Jesus' words here as prophetic, speaking 2000 years ago about a future time, our time in the 21st century, when all these bad things would happen and then he would return. The end times. The second coming, the end of life as we know it.

These verses do speak about what is happening today. Nation is rising against nation.

There have been earthquakes, tsunamis, famines and disease, HIV Aids and ebola.

The nations are in anguish and perplexed about the turmoil and disruption, people are faint with terror.

It does seem that the whole earth is trembling.

But is any of this really new? Is Jesus not simply speaking about the sin of the world in every generation? Is he not speaking about human brokenness in every age from Old Testament times before he came to earth, the times that Jesus lived in, up to the present times?

Jesus spoke about the enemy at the gates of Jerusalem, the trampling of the city and the fall of the Temple – all of which would happen within a few decades of his death. Some of the early church might have thought that Jesus would return in their lifetime but Jesus never indicated a timescale for his return.

There have been horrors and brutality in every century. Kings and leaders have risen up with the dream of possessing a worldwide kingdom that would last forever. Some have come close to dominating much of the known world – Augustus Caesar, Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Hitler.

But in spite of all their sabre rattling and pretensions and self-glorification, the great earthly rulers proved mortal like everyone else. They had their day in the sun and they disappeared. Their kingdoms largely disappeared too, leaving abundant ruins for generations of tourists and archeologists to explore.

Nations have invaded other nations in every generation, we have seen two world wars, the wars to end all wars – and then more and more and more.

The British and German soldiers in the trenches a hundred years ago were experiencing a kind of hell on earth – mud and disease and corpses and mustard gas and casualties

who would never be the same again. They might have thought that Luke 21 was coming to a climax in their lifetime.

Likewise those who lived through the Second World War – the Blitz in London, Coventry and Dresden, thousands of lives lost in battles on land, sea and sky, prisoners of war treated inhumanely, atomic bombs falling on whole city populations. The people then might have thought that Luke 21 was coming to a climax in their lifetime.

Every generation since Jesus has had those who thought they were the last. They have all been wrong.

We might see that all the main players are lining up today for mass conflict - Russia, the United States, France and the UK and EU, Israel, and the many varying Islamic nations ranging from Saudi Arabia to Iran are present. Isn't this all laid out somewhere in Revelation or maybe Daniel? In the aftermath of the attacks in Paris the great powers do seem ready to engage in a major military operation, which is fueling apocalyptic fever. The only question left concerns who will light the match to set off the explosion that will trigger Armageddon.

Can we find hope in the midst of devastation? When all the signs seem to be pointing to catastrophe, is it possible to see the hope? As we begin the time of Advent, the preparation for the celebration of Christmas, can we start to see the world through Advent eyes? The signs of disaster are easy to see. Can we see the signs of hope? When there is death and destruction, can we as the verse says “Stand up straight and raise our heads, because our redemption is near.”

Jesus points us towards hope. Having spoken about world destruction and the Apocalypse, he suddenly tells a parable or more accurately gives us a simple picture because it is not a story like most parables. **It is a picture of a fig tree** or of any tree, which sprouts leaves, buds appear and we know that summer is near.

In our country buds appear at the end of winter often in the cold dark days when there is snow and ice. Then comes the warmth of spring and summer and the leaves and blossom burst out.

Jesus said that this picture reminds us that the kingdom of God is near even although the days are dark and the nations are trembling.

Perhaps Jesus is being prophetic here, saying that when the apocalypse happens, then he will return.

But I think that he is also saying that whatever happens, even the worst things, he is here – and he was always here, his word will never die. Jesus is the Word of the God, the logos, and so he will never die. The kingdom of God is here already although not fully.

Jesus is speaking the truth, not about our future but about our human condition, the world's condition that never really changes. We can take comfort from Jesus' words. The promise is that God created a different life for us which is the reason for Advent. Advent is full of the present and the “not yet” of God's kingdom. Advent speaks about the tension between our reality and what we see in the world and God's vision for our future. Advent helps us to get a sense of what it feels like to be secure in what is to come, yet we still have to wait.

And so, maybe that baby shower is on the cards after all. The pregnancy of one mere teenager Mary is no longer an ordinary matter; indeed, the pregnancy of this particular teenager provides the beginning a cosmic event. In the birth of a helpless baby all the powers of the universe find that the days of their own power are numbered. Nothing will ever be the same.

We need to wait and to watch. We are not to get totally distracted by parties and drinking and shopping and the stresses of life. Jesus said that we are to watch and to pray so that we will have the strength and alertness to get us through all that might come against us and in the end be able to stand before the Son of Man.

And so like every generation in every century since Jesus came the first time, we are to wait and to watch and live our lives as Jesus called us to, to be salt and light on the earth and to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus himself in our dealings with others.

If we are totally influenced by the hysterical media, we will react to the crisis of war and terror and refugees with fear and suspicion and rejection. If we are influenced by the Word of God, we will react with confidence and compassion and love.

We are told that ISIS operatives might mingle with the flow of refugees from war torn countries. This might be true but the vast majority of human beings on the move are fleeing for their lives and to protect the lives of their families, having lost everything and left everything behind. What should our Christian reaction be?

A pastor's wife, Stephanie, was in her local library with her two daughters. She met a woman from North Africa named Fatimah. Fatimah was outgoing and they struck up a conversation while the two girls read books with Fatimah's son Mohammed.

When Fatimah was a girl her country endured a brutal civil war that dragged on for nearly two decades and claimed half a million lives. As a result, her family fled their home and country. Fatimah is a refugee.

To anyone looking on in the library that day, Stephanie and Fatimah could not have been more different. They had radically different upbringings, spoke different native languages and dressed and acted differently. Stephanie is an evangelical Christian and Fatimah is a Sunni Muslim.

And yet, because they share a common humanity, they are more similar than different. They laughed as they talked about raising children, about pregnancy and birth and where they like to go with the children. Towards the end of the conversation, Fatimah shared that she is lonely most days and Stephanie invited her for lunch. They exchanged addresses and phone numbers.

And so, because of a bloody, senseless civil war, a Muslim from a remote village in Africa found herself making a new friendship with a Christian. By every account, her life seems a tragedy. She's certainly a victim of great evil. But what is equally clear, for those with eyes to see, is that God is up to something good.

We need to keep asking "What is God doing?" Syria has over 20 million Muslims many of them unreached by Christianity. Christian churches and missionaries have spent years developing strategies and praying and learning new languages and risking everything to take the gospel to these people and now God is bringing them here in their hundreds and thousands.

The kind of conversation that Stephanie and Fatimah had could be repeated throughout the country. Many hurting and broken people will experience their first Advent and their first Christmas in this country this year. They recognise Jesus as a good and wise prophet but it should be our prayer that they will come to know him as the Son of God.

God cares for all his suffering people and we should do the same. Jesus told us that when we give our money and possessions to those in need, we give in his name. When we welcome the stranger and give him shelter and food, when we clothe him, we do so in Jesus' name.

And so come, Lord Jesus, and strengthen us in our daily lives.

Come, Lord Jesus, that we might stand with our heads held high, every watchful and ever praying.

Come, Lord Jesus, to those who do not yet know you and make this Advent season a time of breakthrough.

AMEN