

Sermon at Kendal Parish Church on Luke 21: 5-19

Today's Bible readings probably don't come in the list of the top 10 most encouraging bible verses of all time. The Gospel reading has Jesus speaking about the overthrow of the temple and general gloom, doom and destruction. But, contrary to appearances, these passages are actually filled with hope and certainty - and can be a real source of reassurance for us likewise living through uncertain times.

Jesus's followers had been with him in the Temple where he had been teaching people and generally challenging the chief priests and the scribes.

And people around them had been admiring the Temple - the Temple that occupied the central place the national life, religion and imagination of Israel. It was a beautiful temple, decorated over hundreds of years to represent the heritage and story of God and his people.

When I visited the Holy Land last year I saw the bits of the Temple walls that remain on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. They have excavated parts of the Western Wall and you can go down into tunnels to look at the stones that formed the original Temple complex, including what's called the Master Course. The largest stone they have found is over 13m by 3m by 4m and weighs about 600 tons. It is one of the heaviest objects ever lifted by human beings without powered machinery. These huge stones acted as a stabiliser for the whole Temple.

So imagine looking at a stone that big and being told, 'the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down'. Jesus prediction would have been outrageous to Jesus's listeners. What? The Temple? Surely not. That could never happen? This would be a bit like saying to us that Buckingham Palace will fall down, or Nelson's column will topple over, or the Houses of Parliament or some other symbol that we would associate with the very heart of Britishness.

Only more so.

The disciples would have heard Jesus' words with the same shock that I remember as I watched on live television the second airplane fly into the tower of the World Trade Centre on 9/11 and then began to hear of attacks on the Pentagon and potentially on Washington and thinking: 'What's going on? What is this? What is happening. Is the end of the world?'

It's that kind of shock for Jesus hearers. This is truly apocalyptic stuff.

Of course by the time Luke wrote his Gospel the Temple had indeed been destroyed, by the Romans in AD 70, during the Siege of Jerusalem. So for Luke's first readers these hearing Jesus make these predictions held an awful reality.

What about us?

Of course, here in Kendal, we are not in the same kind of danger, in reality, as was experienced in the Fall of Jerusalem. But what if someone had said to you 5 years ago - Donald Trump will be President of the United States, Boris Johnson will be Prime Minister, we will have voted to leave the European Union, we'll be facing the 3rd General Election in 5 years, and the climate emergency will become so urgent that people will take to the streets in protest, bringing cities to a standstill. Whatever you think about all those issues, these facts would have seemed relatively improbable.

And yet here we are in the midst of uncertain times. Each night the news contains another twist and turn no one anticipated. You hear this phrase quite often: 'What next? Nothing would surprise me any more'.

It could be very easy to feel a sense of gloom and doom about the days we're living through. Environmental anxiety, for instance, has been identified as a very real phenomena. Last week I watched the latest excellent David Attenborough series Seven Worlds: One Planet, which as always showed brilliantly both the beauty of our planet and the grave danger it's in due to climate change. I watched it with my 18 year old son, and we spoke afterwards about how we wanted to buy Palm Oil free products that would be friendly to the wonderful orang-utans we'd just watched. But he told me also about the powerlessness he and his friends feel, as they try to do their small part in buying environmentally friendly products - while at the same time America opts US out of the Paris climate change deal, and large countries like China and India continue to burn fossil fuels, literally, like there's no tomorrow. That powerlessness can lead to real anxiety in the generation who will be most affected by what we have done to our planet.

Perhaps we too, with Jesus disciples might be tempted to ask; "What next? When will all this be and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

And, as I said, Jesus's words aren't immediately reassuring. He predicts wars and uprisings, nation against nation, earthquakes, famines, plagues and persecution. It's all very well for Jesus to say, 'Do not be terrified'! Why on earth not? we might be tempted to cry. It all seems pretty terrifying!

So what comfort can we glean from this rather strange passage? Because contrary to initial appearances, I think it does indeed offer us a way of seeing our present times, being prepared as Christians to face all that may come our way - and helping others to do likewise.

3 reasons why we should not be terrified, despite appearances.

The first reason not to be terrified is that ... What we are living through is nothing new. It feels bad. It feels worse than anything. And it has been always thus. People worried about the future in Jesus's day, Luke's first readers worried about the future, and we worry about the future now.

We know the world is a pretty messed up place. Sinfulness and greed and the worst sides of human nature means that there will always be those who seek to divide and exploit others for their own ends. We just need to check our hearts and make sure we're not among them.

So when we feel overwhelmed, and terrified, I wonder if one response could be to set our worries in context; to give thanks for the blessings we do have, to pray fervently for our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who experience real threat to life and to do what small things we can towards the healing of our society, our nation, our planet.

A young girl was walking along a beach upon which thousands of starfish had been washed up during a terrible storm. When she came to each starfish, she would pick it up, and throw it back into the ocean. She had been doing this for some time when a man approached her and said, "Little girl, why are you doing this? You can't save all these starfish. You can't begin to make a difference!" After a few moments, she bent down, picked up another starfish, and hurled it as far as she could into the ocean. Then she looked up at the man and replied, "Well, I made a difference to that one!"

The second reason not to be terrified is that ... although, as Jesus says, 'kingdom will rise against kingdom', he also reminds his disciples, and us, that we are part of another kingdom - the Kingdom of God, and our citizenship is in heaven. Because we have a Saviour, Jesus, who has passed through the very worst calamity, death itself, and is now living, we know that there is nothing that holds a threat to Christ's followers, not even death itself.

That phrase that speaks of not even a hair on our heads perishing is a tricky one to understand, not least because we know that people do perish, even Christian people, in all sorts of tragic circumstances and that unfortunately in some parts of the world actual martyrdom is a very real threat. The phrase "losing hair from one's head" can clearly mean "being protected from death". So, for instance in Acts Paul tells the sailors in the wrecked ship: "Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads." (Acts 27:34). But it can also suggest that whatever the circumstances, even in death, we are seen and known and precious to God. Matthew 12 says "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows" (12:4-7).

So - even when it appears that nothing is sure and stable and even as the 'beautiful stones' in our lives and our society and our world, that we always assumed were sure and certain, appear to be thrown down, we can be comforted by the assurance that his Kingdom will have no end, and that God is looking after his faithful people.

It's because of this knowledge that we can do a slightly strange thing in the face of all the change upheaval - and not be terrified. We can add a peaceable, non-anxious presence to our frantic world; by being a calming and reconciling, rather than provoking, presence on social media, by meeting to pray (as I know you have been doing as a church in response to Brexit), by being engaged with the political processes around the election, by bringing peace and faith to our communities in turbulent times.

The third reason not to be terrified is that ...

Any upheaval and change, such as that we are living through now, gives us an opportunity to speak about the reason for our hope, and to witness to all that our faith means to us.

Jesus says that his followers will be handed over to synagogues and prisons, and will be brought before kings and governors because of his name (which is of course what happened to Jesus himself), but that when that happened it 'would give them an opportunity - yes, an opportunity, or some translations even say a gift - to testify'.

I guess he's right. The political upheaval we're experiencing at the moment does give us an opportunity to speak about what we believe in and what we value (as everyone is doing). An upcoming election does give us a chance to examine the claims of all the political parties and look at what they promise and stand for with the lenses of faith. We might want to ask questions such as; 'Which of these parties do I think will do the most to stand up for the poor and the marginalised in our society? Which do we think will best nurture the kinds of values we want to see expressed as Christians? And then that also gives an opportunity to say why we might vote one way or another and to bring our faith into that.

Jesus says another rather surprising thing when he says: 'make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance'. Now that's a nightmare for me. I'm someone who likes to plan what I am going to say very carefully - and I don't think Jesus is advocating negligence here. I don't think that means that we shouldn't think about how we might speak about our faith. It is simply Jesus's

encouragement to his followers that if they are given the opportunity to testify, they can rely on the help of God's Holy Spirit and they don't stand alone to offer their defence.

So this not an excuse for a lack of prayer and thought and study (and listening well to sermons!). But it is an assurance that when we do have to give an account of our relationship with Jesus, we don't stand there alone to do that - we will be given the wisdom and the words to say - that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. That should be a great reassurance to us.

So don't be terrified.

What we testify to as Christians - whatever turmoil is going on around us - is the triumph of life over death, light over darkness, peace over war, unity over division. What Jesus is calling for here is a kingdom vision that takes us through and beyond any terror, a vision that meets terror with faith, trust and endurance.

Let's pray:

O God,

in Christ you give us hope

for a new heaven and a new earth.

Grant us wisdom to interpret the signs of our times,

courage to stand in the time of trial,

and faith to witness to your truth and love.

Amen.