



The Oratoire, Aix-en-Provence

Sermon

Sunday, 1st December 2019

Advent Sunday

Year A: Isaiah 2.1-5; Romans 13.11-14; Matthew 24.36-44

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As we begin Advent, the Lectionary offers us some apparently contrasting readings. The beautiful vision in Isaiah is one we have heard in recent weeks, in the season we have been reflecting on the tragedy and cost of war. The vision is of all the nations streaming back to God, submitting to him as arbiter of their differences and asking to be taught his ways and walk in his paths: ‘they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.’

Cut to Matthew and Paul, and the tone seems very different: ‘all the tribes of the earth will mourn’, our Gospel reading says, when the Son of Man comes. We are warned that it will be like the days of Noah, with some being taken and others left behind, and Paul urges us that it’s time to wake up because it is all going to happen imminently. Our New Testament readings seem more likely to instil fear in us rather than reassurance. How are we to reconcile them with the vision of peace in Isaiah?

To put our Gospel reading in context, earlier in the chapter the disciples had been pointing with awe at the great temple in Jerusalem, but Jesus had replied that one



day it would be destroyed. By the time Matthew's Gospel was written, this had actually happened - the temple and city of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Roman army in AD70. The disciples assumed this would be the end of the world for Israel, and there's a cosmic dimension to it too – a sense of catastrophe that would usher in the new creation. Naturally the question on the disciples' lips – and no doubt too the lips of those for whom Matthew was writing - was: 'When will this be?' Jesus's reply is enigmatic: 'About that day and hour no one knows ... only the Father.'

One way of reflecting on this passage – and more generally on the apocalyptic writing in Scripture often set for this season of the Church's year - is that it reminds us that human life may at times seem ordered and reliable (like the temple dominating the skyline) but at other times it can feel precarious and unpredictable. However much we may feel in control, we are always vulnerable. The unexpected and unplanned can throw our normal lives into turmoil – illness, bereavement, loss of employment or some other role that is important to us, an experience of failure, rejection or betrayal. It is then that our resilience is tried, our faith tested. We know intellectually that these things are part of life, but when they happen to us they can feel devastating. Like being swept away in a flood, as in the days of Noah.

There's an interesting commentary on this part of Matthew's Gospel¹ which relates it to the nature of fear and how we process it. Any course on stress management begins by pointing out that fear is not all bad. It's a mechanism that helps us to avoid danger. With a feeling of threat the amygdala in our brain increases its activity and begins the fight-or-flight response that kept our hunter-gatherer ancestors alive. Fear also protects us by engaging our more watchful

¹ Joretta L Marshall, writing in *Feasting on Matthew*, vol 2, p 242-6, citing the work of Louis Cozolino in *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 247.



responses. Our learned responses to danger accumulate, so that we instinctively take our hand away from the hot saucepan before we even feel how badly it is burning us.

Fear can, however, be so extreme that it paralyses us and makes us feel unable to take any action. The sort of fear that some people live with constantly can function negatively both in our personal and spiritual lives. The sense of always living on the edge of danger. Those who have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder know what it means to live with a sense of heightened threat that makes it difficult to live full and healthy lives.

At its best, between these two extremes – the fear that keeps us safe and the fear that traumatises us – there lies a developing wisdom that is important for survival. People can develop a courage and capacity to persevere in the midst of fear. The Gospel of hope can and should empower us to move boldly into the world, not to seek to escape from it. This is what, notes the commentator, the writer of Matthew's account would have been seeking to encourage.

Fear is, in the end, a God-given emotion that functions both positively and negatively in our lives. In the right moments it is an appropriate response, moving us to react in ways that protect us and our loved ones, and helping us see new possibilities in the midst of turbulent times. If we understand this capacity for fear to motivate positive action, we start to see texts like our passage this morning in a different way. The writer of Matthew's Gospel was not seeking to induce a fear-based belief, but encouraging people whose city and world had already been destroyed towards an attitude of trust, living out of their redemptive experience of Christ. They were encouraged to interpret their experience as part of the sufferings of the so-called 'end times' – the impending 'day of the Lord'. By placing their sufferings in the context of God's wider work, they would be



reassured of God's sovereignty, helped to listen for 'the trumpet' and live abundant lives. Apocalyptic writing is designed to engender hope in God's mighty and mysterious works of salvation.

The season of Advent is about hope. It's about looking beyond the present darkness towards God's light. The patriarchs, whose part in salvation history we acknowledge on this first Sunday of Advent, knew how to do this. Abraham obeys the call of God to leave the security of his home to found a new nation in a land he did not know, with only faith to guide him. He trusts in God even when God calls him to sacrifice his own son, an event in which Christians tend to see the foreshadowing of Christ's own redemptive sacrifice on the cross.

The symbolism of hope is everywhere in Advent, in readings and carols, prayers and music. 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.' – words from Isaiah (9.2). 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it', says St John.

That is what, as Christians, we stand for. It doesn't mean that we don't feel fear. But it does mean that when fear risks paralysing us with anxiety we can gather ourselves and hold to the hope we have in Christ that 'God's mighty and mysterious works of salvation' are as real for us now as they were for the patriarchs, for the first Christians, and for all who have lived in between them and us. The words that ring out through the whole of the New Testament are 'Fear not'. The message of the angel to Mary. The message of the angel to Joseph. The message of Christ to his followers. And the message we are called upon to own and pass on to others. There is a God who loves us, whose ways we may not always understand, but who was willing to become one of us, to share our joys and sorrows, to suffer and to die for us. And who rose again to show us that



nothing that can happen to us will ever defeat us, because even death itself is subject to his ‘just and gentle rule’.

In a Reflection for Advent, the contemporary theologian Sam Wells has written this: ‘Christ rose from the dead to show you how the story ends, that all your pain and agony and tears will be taken up into glory, that all your sadness will be made beautiful and all your waiting will be rewarded. [Christ ascended into heaven to show you that you’ll spend eternity with God, that your hunger will be met in God’s banquet, that everything you long for will be exceeded and overwhelmed in the glory of the presence of God, and that when you see the marks in Christ’s hands and the Father’s broken heart, you’ll finally realise how achingly, convulsingly hungry God has always been for you].’

That is actually the hope of Advent, which culminates in the joy of Christmas. It’s quite a message to take with us into the darkest days of the year. And quite a message for us to be able to pass on to others. Which, God willing, is what we will do.

Amen.