

The End Times

Luke 21: 5 -19

Last week, in our churches and cenotaphs, we remembered the dead of two world wars, reflected on the fact that behind each name on the roll of honour there was a story, a human being, a young person poised on the very brink of life. It brought home the ultimate futility of war, the devastation of lives, broken bodies, broken minds, broken families, broken society.

For me, at St. Boniface, the most poignant and moving tribute came from the very youngest children who, in their crèche, guided by Beth, heard each of the names on our roll of honour read out, and for each one placed a pebble in the upturned praying hands. They then prayed for each of the families, and for peace.

After the first World War, society changed radically. Anyone who watches Downton Abbey will appreciate the struggles of the Family adjusting to a completely new way of life.

And, ironically, in the same week, we have watched the unfolding story of devastation by the typhoon in the Philippines. What good will result from that? All we can imagine is utter misery, loss, destruction and criminal looting.

Approximately 65.5 million years ago, an asteroid hit the earth, and the resulting devastation led to the extinction of the dinosaurs, the major life force on earth at the time.

But although this was bad news for the dinosaurs, it made an opportunity for the next set of creatures to develop, the mammals, of which we of course are a part.

Nothing on earth stays the same for ever.

As we sit with Jesus and his friends in the olive grove, gazing over the valley to the glittering sight of Solomon's temple, standing so proud on its hill, with them we can stare in wonder. A monument to the ingenuity of men. A shining beacon, there for always. Or was it?

Jesus said, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another, they will all be thrown down."

And it happened, some forty years later, when Titus destroyed Jerusalem. The old order was about to change, to be replaced by something new.

How many of us read our horoscopes? Even if you don't, I'm sure you know what your birth sign is! Although we know that they are really nonsense, we do have a sneaky feeling that it may be right. We read into

it what we want to see. We want to know what's round the corner, what is going to happen to us.

We like order in our lives, we want to know what is happening, what to put in the diary.

Jesus lived in a superstitious age, when signs and portents from the heavens like shooting stars, bright planets or eclipses of the sun were seen to foretell apocalyptic happenings.

The disciples wanted a sign like that to look out for, to know when Jesus' prediction would take place, what would happen and what would be the signs?

Imagine the disciples' horror. Solomon's temple, rebuilt by Herod and still unfinished, was to go.

So why would God do this? The Temple had been the focus of Israel's worship for 1,000 years, but it had become a dinosaur, it had outlived its usefulness.

This temple, with its magnificent stones was merely a "temple made with hands".

The old order focussed on one nation, the Jews, and its national shrine, but it had come to stand for the perversion of Israel's call, their introspection and self centeredness, that Jesus had opposed all during his ministry. The type of worship they had known all their lives, was coming to an end.

No longer would there be sacrifices and temple worship, but it was going to be a stormy time. The "closed shop" was opening out. What God was now preparing through the ministry of Jesus was a new temple, "not made with hands" a new order in which all nations would indeed find their house of prayer. God didn't live in a single building in a single country, but in a faith community which would transcend all political and racial boundaries.

How were they, and we, to know the truth?

Jesus clearly said, "Watch out that you are not deceived, for many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and 'The time is near'. Do not follow them."

Maybe we, too, have been worshipping dinosaurs.

Have we become moribund following traditions that have lost their purpose, lost their meaning?

In Assisi recently, disappointed by the commercialism of it all, I was shuffled past the tomb of St. Francis with hundreds of other pilgrims who were praying and laying roses as they went.

But it was a hollow ritual. No time to stop and reflect, not a religious experience for me! I wondered why we set such store by old bones, old stones.

We need to be careful in our worship, too.

I am not advocating “throwing the baby out with the bath water” or “dumbing down” our worship to shallow banalities. But we must pause and consider what we are doing. We must take time to reflect on the words and music we use in our readings, prayers and hymns, and not just go through the motions.

It used to be the custom for people to come into church quietly and read through the service and pray about what they are about to take part in. We have lost that culture now. It is time to start again with our young people in a way that is meaningful to them, and engage them in the worship and love of Jesus. And we have shown it can be done, even with the youngest children.

We are now in a time of waiting, of watching.

The world is convulsed with famines, earthquakes, wars, destruction.

Well, we don't need to look far to see all that, happening now, before our very eyes.

Jesus knew that he would not be with the disciples when all this happened. He warned them of the dangers of following him, the hatred, the persecution, the trials, the putting to death for their faith.

Yet Jesus tells them not to worry!

They are not to think about how they will react. Jesus will give them the right words and the wisdom to deal with every situation. They are to keep their eyes fixed on their one main purpose, to testify faithfully and to trust Jesus.

What faith tells them, and us, is that God is moving and fulfilling his purpose in ways we can never understand in every adversity we face.

C.S Lewis tells us that the good things in our life on earth is a preparation, a foretaste of what is to come, our faithful endurance throughout all the trials we meet will lead us ultimately to something immeasurably better, beyond our present comprehension.

We are not to let fears get in the way, nor waste time in idle speculation, we need a sort of spiritual “keep calm and carry on.”

And Jesus himself is the supreme example of this.

At this time in the life of Jesus, where tension is visibly mounting, and the shadow of the terrible climax in Jerusalem is in sight, Jesus is carrying on exactly as before. He still preaches, teaches, heals and urges people to

look towards God and his kingdom. All around him, people are trying to work out what will happen, what they should do about it. Only Jesus carries on, unchanging.

Are we trying to persuade God to do things our way, instead of waiting in patience for his call?

We can only live in our own time. Despite our communications, our technology, it has been much the same, over the centuries. It is in this beautiful yet corrupt world that we need to play our part. And, sadly, Christians are still being persecuted for their faith. And we need to pray for them.

The Temple ultimately failed because ritual became corrupt, being seen to obey the law was more important than common humanity, caring for people, the outcasts, the infirm.

Let that not happen to us.

Let us make our worship a reaffirmation of our calling, let us listen, read and sing with our hearts as well as our voices, to praise God for his blessings and receive his strength to go out into our imperfect world and make a difference.

Those who walk with Christ may lose their lives, but they can never lose their souls.

And may this be our prayer today. Amen.

Pat Ellis