

Isaiah 65. 17-25

Isaiah 12

2 Thessalonians 3. 6-13

Luke 21. 5-19

I wonder if you can remember the first time you saw the Sydney opera house – in the flesh, not just in a photo. How did you approach it? Was it along the rather dull pedestrian approach from Circular Key? Or did you see it from across the water; with its billowing sails emerging from the harbour. Or was it from the bridge; the sun glinting from its brilliant, tessellated sails?

There are maybe two iconic sites in Australia which are emblematic of our country, images of which anyone from across the globe recognises as representative of Australia. The first would be Uluru – that megalith at the centre of our continent. The other would be the opera house – 50 years this year since it opened - in all its extraordinary, audacious creative brilliance. But we know, it was not always loved. The Danish architect Jorn Utzon was eventually driven out of Australia by complications with funding and construction but ultimately by the parochial, small-mindedness of post war Australia. Utzon's vision was utterly an inventive and visionary one for the site. I can recall seeing images of the other designs which were submitted for the Opera House design competition in the 1950s. One was of a kind of boxy, giant public toilet-like building. Anything, I suppose, would have been an improvement on the hideously ugly tram depot that previously occupied Bennelong Point.

Imagine if the opera house was pulled down. Imagine if somehow it was demolished; blown up; collapsed due to an earthquake. And couldn't be rebuilt.

[image]

This in a way is the context of today's gospel reading. Luke's Gospel was written around the last decade of the first century, around or sometime after the year 90AD. Jesus had been dead 60-70 years when Luke's gospel was written and the temple *had* been destroyed. Like the Sydney Opera House is emblematic of Australian identity, the temple was totally emblematic of Jewish identity. But much more so than the opera house – because national, religious political identity was caught up in the temple – everything to do with Jewish identity. The temple was Immense, expensive and audacious in its design and construction. Parts of it they say were coated with gold, so that if the sun was shining when you approached it you were virtually blinded by its brilliance.

The temple which Jesus knew, to which his family and he went through his life was about 600 years old at that time. But one to two decades before Jesus' birth Herod the Great – the one Matthew tells us ordered the massacre of the innocents – expanded the temple, doubling the size of its forecourt and approaches to about 35 acres, making it a marvel of the Mediterranean world. It was a symbol of Jewish resilience and identity in a world where the little nation had been overrun and devastated by wave after wave of aggressive neighbours: Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans – amongst others. The temple was sign of their chosenness as God's people.

Luke tells us Jesus says to those around him: the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’ The immense stones we know as the wailing Wall or the Western Wall in Jerusalem are the remnant of this temple’s foundations.

The background to Luke’s gospel is that Jerusalem is destroyed and this iconic temple is almost entirely torn down. All of Jewish life and identity is utterly disrupted. What will the future hold for us – is the question at the heart of Israel.

This week in the Age there was an article by journalist Sean Kelly asking some questions about deaths of aboriginal people – in particular about the beating death of Cassius Turvey. Kelly was wondering about what kind of disruption might be required for things to change in mainstream Australia’s relationship with the first peoples of Australia: for the incarceration rate to lower, for aboriginal deaths in custody to stop, for things to change sufficiently so that aboriginal people going about their everyday lives - as Cassius Turvey was going about his everyday life in walking home from school - will not prove to be a risk to their very life. Kelly was wondering why it is that we cannot do in order for these things to change. What is obstructing us? Why, even though we decry what has happened, do we just continue to go about our daily lives?

He was wondering about what he called limits to our imaginations when we begin to think along paths already laid down for us by news, by peers, by habit. These ways of thinking prevent us from going beyond these limits and we become resigned to the situation as it is. In relation to aboriginal deaths he suggests, we struggle to go beyond the expectation that things always go badly for our indigenous people.

As an aside and thinking about these limits to our imaginations and in relation to violence against women, I wonder why it is that so much attention is being given to protecting women in both real and legal ways and not asking: what is that we are doing to men which is making them so pent up and violent. What is it that we are not willing to think about our raising of boys that turns them into predators. Why can’t we ask these questions? My hunch is because it would mean questioning our whole way of doing things; and that, we seem unwilling to do.

As we approach the end of the church year and then move through the season of Advent we will hear a number of readings from the Gospels anticipating an end time – those texts we call apocalyptic. No question these are difficult texts to read and even more difficult to make sense of. In the past few decades there has been a literary genre with a Christian apocalyptic basis grow up about the end of the world and widespread global destruction. It is driven by an apocalyptic anticipation in the evangelical church of the battle of Armageddon and the return of Christ, especially in the connection between the conservative church in the United States and the State of Israel. We know that US leaders are timid about challenging Israel over its treatment of Palestinians because this may risk their political support from far right Christians in the US who anticipate that a volatile Middle East is a sign – as Jesus would call it – of the approaching Armageddon. There is a hard-wired connection between the imagination of this Christian far right and the way politics is played in the US and on the world stage. This is not just fiction, because we have seen this at play this week in the issues at play in the US mid-term elections.

Sean Kelly in his article made reference to the spate of dystopian books and movies which feed on this apocalyptic mindset. Teenagers feed on this stuff – I know my nieces and nephews raised in a fundamentalist household were fed it - and it shapes children’s take on the world. These

teenagers grow into adults. Meaning they enter into a state of inevitability about the end of things. In many ways this genre of literature – if you could call it that – fosters despair; fosters a mindset of inevitability; there’s nothing that can be done about it.

Kelly makes reference to someone trying to explain this mindset when thinking about our way of life – the way of life we have come to expect: “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism”. What he meant was that changing our trajectory, in which fossil fuels and greed are driving us into disaster, demands a re-imagining of society. In the face of that enormously hard task, we find it easier to imagine apocalypse. The end of the world has become, rather than a cause for terror, a comforting thought: a way to reassure ourselves that it is alright to do nothing because nothing can be done. It a response of despair. And we all risk being caught up in it. We are all caught up in it in our own way.

World leaders have been meeting in Egypt at COP27 this week. Apparently, there are a larger than usual number of fossil fuel lobbyists present at this meeting, resisting any change to the way our prosperity is fuelled. We know this needs to change. There are many whose lives are already disrupted: the people of the low-lying islands of the Pacific; the people in too many places in Africa facing extreme droughts; the farmers and rural dwellers of Australia facing destructive floods. And not only humans but so many parts of the creation – but all creatures and the floral and inanimate world. Recycling our soft plastics is not going to cut it. Will we allow our entire global ecosystem to unravel, rather than place our way of life under scrutiny?

Luke is writing his Gospel for followers of the way whose lives have unravelled, have been utterly disrupted. And they under persecution, not only from the authorities but from those closest to them – even family. We know it is unpopular to question the extravagance of the lifestyle to which we have become accustomed; unpopular to question that we can’t continue to have it all; unpopular to ask if it’s going to be possible for all seven billion of us to have it all.

As Jesus’ disciples we are called to live by a different measure. To have our lives and our identities rooted in God; to have our life paths set in the pattern of Jesus. The pattern of the Christian life is that of death and resurrection – following in the pattern of Jesus. This is not just some anticipated event in the future but is integral to the Christian path. As Paul expresses it: *Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.* I don’t need to tell you that death is disruptive. The ultimate disruption. Walking in newness of life is walking in hope, not in despair. It is walking with eyes open, watchful for the reign of God. Jesus says to the disciples in the face of the destruction of the temple: by your endurance you will gain your souls. There is something about being fully alive, even when we can see the brokenness of the world around and yet be still able to live in hope with humility and love. This is the path we are called to and we tread it with confidence because Jesus has gone this way before us.

Thanks be to God.

Andrew Boyle