

ADVENT 1

1 DECEMBER 2024

Jeremiah 33. 14-16

Psalm 25. 4 – 10

Luke 21. 25 - 38

From the river to the sea; Palestine will be free. It's a cry, a slogan which has been used by Palestinians and their supporters over the past year as the pincer-like grip of the IMF has closed on Gaza, especially, and also the West Bank in Israel, crushing their inhabitants. In various places around the world, sometimes by law and in other places, universities and other institutions there have been attempts to ban the words. *From the river to the sea; Ban the words.* Like our own state government has placed a ban on the Nazi salute and other forms of Nazi observance, this Palestinian cry is banned, we are told, because the phrase bespeaks of a Palestinian intention that all things Jewish will be expelled from the river to the sea. It's antisemitic.

Strange thing is, *from the river to the sea* is a semitic phrase. It is a biblical claim and cry. Psalm 89 reads:

I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
²¹ my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.
²² The enemy shall not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.
²³ I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
²⁴ My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.
²⁵ I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
²⁹ I will establish his line for ever,
and his throne as long as the heavens endure.

As we approach Christmas once again and we hear a series of readings with echoes of longing for a king like David, of fresh growth from the root of Jesse, these readings are not without problem for us in this time. How do we say, how do we pray these words: *In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.* What does it mean for us to read and recite these words with Jews and Christians down the millennia? To sing: O come, O com Emanuel, and ransom captive Israel? I know colleagues who have omitted these words from their worship at present.

How did Jews pray these words from the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 and the formation of the State of Israel in 1948? How did these words provoke or comfort or reassure their dislocated - displaced imaginations for all those centuries? What longing was elicited in them as they did this? Or was it a prayer of defeat, of impotence, of victimhood or one which was spiritualised, theorised, never to be realised?

We have today, on this first day of the new church year, begun to read the Gospel of Luke. The master-storyteller will be our companion and guide for fifty two Sundays as we make our way

through the church year. Luke is the author of two texts in our Christian scriptures – comprising 25% of them: first the Gospel which bears his name and then his second volume: the Acts of Apostles. Maybe the first could be entitled: the Acts of Jesus as the prequel to the Acts of the Apostles.

But instead of starting at the very beginning today, a very good place to start, we start at the end. Not just of the Gospel, but the end of all things. It's a confronting picture. *There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. Be on guard ...*

These words to the disciples follow Jesus' prediction that the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed: *the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.* It is Luke's rendering of what we heard from Mark last week; of the temple being laid waste. But these things *have* come about as Luke wrote his account – Luke puts pen to parchment after the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70. The temple is laid waste. And it still lies in waste.

Jesus says to the disciples: *'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!"* and, "The time is near!"* Do not go after them.*

In the past 5 or so decades there is a genre of apocalyptic literature which has emerged in the United States. The most successful series of books are called *the Left Behind* series. Left behind? It's a post-apocalyptic world about not quite sufficiently faithful Christians who have been left behind after Jesus has returned and raptured all of the truly faithful. The *Left Behind* series is a multi-media franchise of apocalyptic fiction which draws on the "end of the age" material from the Revelation to John. John's apocalyptic visions connect with last week's passage from Mark and today's passage from Luke. When a passage begins *In those days ...* they conjure a kind of unravelling of the cosmos; a return of the primordial chaos, a collapsing back to when all the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.

This *Left Behind* series has added a kind of divine fuel to the penchant in American culture for destruction on an epic, if not global, scale. Films like the *Towering Inferno* from 1974, *End of Days* 1999 amongst many; and then post-the year 2000 dozens upon dozens of films portraying the end of the world. Multiple books from *the Left Behind* series of sixteen novels have repeatedly been on the NYT best seller list. Some of the sixteen volumes have sold up to 65 million copies and been translated into multiple languages, along with spawning a 40 volume edition for teenagers.

Prior to the US election I watched a documentary on Christian nationalism in the country – a sub-culture which is barely visible to the mainstream, outside world but which has its own music, news literature, politics and take on Christian faith and fate of the earth. They are particularly keen – if not seeing themselves as divinely ordained to influence both US politics and international relations. There is strong support for US involvement in Israel; because they want to bring on the apocalypse: and the return of Jesus. *"Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ... when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.*

We marked Christ the King last week – some of my colleagues cannot bring themselves to mark the final Sunday in the church year with this title - because of the problematic legacies of kingship

all around us. But we cannot ignore the term in our scriptures and we must wrestle with the pointing to the kingdom which is so often on Jesus' lips. In Luke the word kingdom is used forty three times; kingdom of God thirty two times. So when Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God amidst all this apocalyptic imagery we must ask ourselves what kingdom is it he is envisioning?

... 'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

... he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.

... cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."^{*}

... 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.'

... he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

What I find strange about the American preoccupation with apocalyptic texts is that it is amongst people in the most powerful nation in our time. The nation that prosecutes wars and its multi-national agenda around the globe. Its citizens are not under threat – at least not from external forces – but so many seem to hanker after a beam-me-up from here kind of God. It is not their cities which lie in waste from bombardment from Russia, or the viciousness of the Israeli Defence Force. It is not their hospitals and schools that have been bombed. Not their citizens driven from one end of an outdoor prison to another, only to be attacked again as they huddle in hunger and fear, without shelter over their heads. It is not their food deliveries for Thanksgiving attacked and destroyed.

Jesus injunction for the disciples to be on guard is encouragement to disciples whose temple and city have been destroyed, laid waste. We might ask ourselves as we read these strange texts questions of how we read them when they don't seem relevant to us; indeed texts which seem utterly foreign. And yet their visions are familiar to us and are the reality for millions elsewhere in our time. On our TVs each night.

As we gather at the eucharist again, share the broken body and the poured out lifeblood, we remember. The Eucharist is a response to Jesus' invitation to remember; to us and to all who have followed and continue to follow Jesus, seeking his peace and the peace of the earth. We share the meal as an act of hope, remembering, refusing to forget his suffering and what is offered to us in the cross as a way to be. This meal is an invitation to embody the kingdom, with hearts not weighed down by despair, but watchful in hope. And so we are personally and collectively nourished by the one who is our peace and calls us to embody his way and to be sign of hope in a distressed world.

Andrew Boyle