

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday before Advent (Proper 28C)

Sunday 17th November 2019

Readings: Malachi 4: 1 – 2a,
2 Thessalonians 3: 6 – 13
Luke 21: 5 – 19

Have you ever said anything that you think is really profound... only to realise that nobody is listening...?

Jesus is in the temple courts, proclaiming the good news. And he's been telling parables about tenants in vineyards, and responding to sadducees asking him trick questions about marriage after the resurrection and he's been warning those listening about people whose faith is only for show... When he spots a poor widow come quietly, unnoticed by anyone else, up to the collection box. She puts two, very small, copper coins into the collection, then turns, and just as quietly shuffles away...

'Truly I tell you' Jesus says 'this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these other people have given their gifts out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, has given all she had to live on'...

He pauses to see what the disciples will say...

But the disciples aren't listening...

Instead, they are busy remarking about how the temple around them is so beautifully adorned with glittering stones...

Look at these stone walls, cries Andrew, so cool to the touch on this hot summer's day. I wonder how much those marble slabs cost? And how many people it possibly took to drag them into place.

But what about those porticos, replies James, imagine climbing up there – you'd be dizzy with the height.

Or the doors, says Bartholomew; have you ever seen doors so big... and the way the bronze of them reflects the first light of the sun...

I like the golden spikes, says Peter; did you know, they put them along the roof to stop the birds perching up there and pooing down the walls.

And look, says Andrew again, look at all those gifts, heaped up at the collection box. See the fabulous amount of wealth donated, all given for the glory of God...

No wonder they haven't seen the poor widow... dazzled by the brilliance of the building...

No wonder Jesus, the ultimate party pooper, is visibly slapping his palm against his head and shouting

'What you see here..

All this...

The time will come when not one stone of all this will remain upon the other...

A time will come when all of this... the walls, the porticos, the doors and the shining, bird-repelling spikes, will be thrown down...

Jesus is trying to get them to see this, this one woman who is giving all she possible can to God, and all his disciples can do is talk about the wonderous glittering beauty of a temple refurbished by a rich, and paranoid despot, more for his own glory, than for the glory God...

No wonder he's a bit frustrated...

And so he continues...

Watch out that you are not deceived

You will hear of wars and uprisings

Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom

And there will be earthquakes, famines and sickness

There will be fearful events and great signs from heaven

And before all this they will seize you and persecute you

And you will be betrayed by your friends and relatives

And everyone will hate you.

And our lectionary reading stops short, we don't even hear as Jesus continues, telling them

How dreadful it will be for pregnant women and nursing mothers

How there will be distress in all the land

How people will faint in terror, apprehensive of what will happen in the world

Be on your watch... he warns, as he comes near the conclusion of his monologue...

Be on your watch... don't get distracted by things that sparkle and glitter... don't get deceived by people whose motivation is all wrong... don't follow those who claim they are something they are not...

Instead, pay attention...

Pay attention to the people on the margins who are showing what it really means to give glory to God

Pay attention to the one who has authority, to the one that will become the cornerstone

Pay attention to the signs of the world around you....

Pay attention because anguish, perplexity and a great turmoil is coming...

Maybe, quite likely, Jesus was prone to using hyperbole.... But I see him here, desperately trying to shake up these disciples who are looking in the wrong direction.

I see him, filled with a passion and a conviction that wants to rally these disciples into bearing witness in and to a world that has got things wrong...

Greta Thunberg, in one of her many impassioned speeches says:

“And when I say that I want you to panic, I mean that we need to treat the crisis as a crisis. When your house is on fire you don’t sit down and talk about how nice you can rebuild it once you have put out the fire. If your house is on fire you run outside and make sure that everyone is out, while you call the fire department. That takes some level of panic”

I think Jesus and Greta would get on pretty well.

They’re both trying to get their listeners to grasp the seriousness of the situation...; whilst the crowd they are speaking to is looking the wrong way and getting distracted by material comforts.

And so I wonder this morning, what we are distracted by....

What is competing for our attention?

And what, whilst our gaze is caught by the alluring twinkle of gilt edged unreality, are we missing...

And yet...

And yet hidden in these apocalyptic predictions; which call the disciples and us to attention...

There the nugget of true gold is hidden.

There, if we turn away from whatever material sparkle has caught our eye...

And turn instead and follow instead Jesus’ gaze....

There we find, in the midst of war and uprising and dire prognosis..

‘Do not be terrified...’ or, in another translation, ‘Do not be afraid...’

Jesus calls his disciples to face up to the sometimes grim prospects of life as a follower in the way...

But then he offers them hope...

And so, the call to pay attention is not just a call to see the stark reality of the future...

Instead it is also a call to Pay attention because there is light in the darkness and you do not need to be afraid...

And to

Pay attention to the only person who is going to give you the words and the wisdom that you need when life gets tough and when it looks like everything is falling apart around you.

And to

Pay attention and to stand firm, because God isn't going to let even a hair on your head perish and through endurance your soul will be saved.

Pay attention and do not be afraid and bear witness and endure...

These words have been spoken by God to faithful believers throughout God's story...

'do not be afraid' said Gabriel to Mary when he told her she would bear a Son, and that he would be great and that his kingdom would never end.

'do not be afraid' said the Angels to the terrified shepherds on the hillside

'do not be afraid' Jesus says to his disciples, on the night before he was crucified.

'do not be afraid' said a young man in a white robe, to the women who found the empty tomb.

Jesus calls his disciples to see how bad things are, and then he gives them hope and tells them not to be afraid.

And that is exactly the kind of message we need for today.

Because, if we pay attention and face the facts of the world, then we have all sorts of fodder for apocalyptic predictions;

Because, whether we turn our eyes towards the political chaos, both here and abroad, or to the economic uncertainty, or to the ongoing situations of war and conflict and violence, or to the breakdown of families and societies, or to the natural disasters, or to the very real dangers of global climate change... Because wherever we turn our attention the storm is raging...

Faced with all of this, it is reassuring to know that in the midst of chaos there is hope and that in the face of fear we are encouraged to have the daring audacity to trust in Jesus' words and their power to speak through our mouths in testimony. Testimony that would bear witness to the fact that ours is a God who can calm any storm; testimony that ours is a God that will show love in the face of hatred and that will stand up to the arrogant and the evil doers and that will come, as the sun of righteousness with justice and healing in its wings.

Jesus' words this morning are wisdom for troubled times. They remind us that even though we may feel powerless to speak into moments of great upheaval and times of chaos and situations of despair; God is with us and we need not be afraid. Our powerlessness is in fact our greatest qualification and though we may worry that we will stutter and stumble and fail in any semblance of eloquence, God will give us the words we need... .. all we need to do, is stand firm and endure.