



Sermon preached by Revd Dr David Cornick on 16th November 2025

Readings: Malachi 4:1-2a; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Second Sunday before Advent

And Jesus walked along King's Parade, and they said to him, 'Isn't that just the most exquisite piece of architecture you've ever seen? Look at the buttresses, the pinnacles, the expanse and colour of the glass. Such exquisite craftsmanship, and all to the glory of God. And Jesus looked up at King's College Chapel, and said, '...the days will come when not one stone will be left on another; all will be thrown down.' (Luke 21:6). 'There are times when I think the Preachers' Union ought to protest at some the texts we have to deal with!

Wars, insurrection, earthquakes, famines, plagues, portents and signs, arrests, persecution, hatred and betrayal. Well, you might say, that's just the Ten O'Clock News and Celebrity Traitors, we're used to that kind of stuff. And there is truth to that of course. If history witnesses to anything, it is to the omnipresence of conflict and the instability of the earth as we journey on, and to the grim ability of human beings to fuse pride and fear and let the resulting divisions wreck communities.

However, to-day's gospel is about one specific piece of that history, and we need to attend to it. The Romans had conquered Judaea in 63 BC, ended Jewish independence and installed the Herodian dynasty as client kings. By the time Jesus was a teenager, the political situation was unstable and threatening. Herod the Great died in 4 BCE and his lands were divided amongst his sons into a tetrarchy. A decade later, the Emperor Augustus deposed the last Jewish ruler of Judaea and appointed a Roman Governor in his place. In that same year there was a small rebellion by Judas the Galilean and his followers, put down with customary force. And for the next six decades, the land was under military rule, subject to occasional bloody suppression. That was the political landscape against which Jesus's ministry took shape.

Jesus' inherited a prophetic mantle from John the Baptist. Listen to Cousin John in Luke, '...His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' (Lk 3:17). The ancient method of winnowing was to toss a shovel full into the air to let the wind blow away the chaff, and for the good seed to fall to the ground. John is telling us that Jesus' intent is to gather to himself the good seed of the new Israel, over which he will rule. But the language, the metaphor, is one of division, and in this Jesus was the inheritor of the prophetic tradition of Israel, incorporating such spiritual giants as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos, who saw God's coming judgement falling on a sinful and impenitent nation. That prophetic poetry, in which the judgement of God is imagined as an empowering of Assyria or Babylon or Rome to defeat Israel was a call to Israel to be true to herself and her God. The grain of the new kingdom, the new Israel, must be separated from the chaff, so that God's way and reign can be established.

We can see that theme unfurl through Luke's telling of the Jesus story. Woe is called down on the Pharisees because their pre-occupation with ritual purity means that they fail to see how Israel has slipped from the moral rails (11:37-54). The blood of the righteous will be required from this generation (11:51). Those who acknowledge Jesus will be vindicated, but those who refuse 'will be denied before the angels of God' (12:9). Israel is like the hedonistic plutocrat who piles up his wealth in barns, but his life will be required of him before the night is out (12:21). The absent master will punish his servants who are not ready for his coming and do not recognise that the hour has come (12:54). Jesus comes to bring fire on the earth and division within families (12:49). Israel should repent or she will suffer the same fate as those killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed (13:1), there is a narrow door and only a few will be saved (12:22). Small wonder Jesus lamented over the intransigence of Jerusalem because '...I desired to gather

your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.’ (13:34) An intransigence that would later move him to tears.

I could go on, but you can see the theme clearly. This strain of metaphorical language, full of images of destruction, death and desolation, was part of the Jewish prophetic vocabulary, and what we need to note and note well, is that it is used to explain what is going on in current politics and what may be imminent. It is about what God will do on earth. Repent, or Rome will raze you to the ground – which is precisely what they did between 66 and 70 CE. This language isn’t about the end of the space-time continuum, or the folding up of the earth according to the second law of thermodynamics, it’s about what God is about to do.

When Jesus sent his disciples out to the towns and villages of Galilee, ‘...to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal’ (9:2), they went in the words of the Biblical scholar George Caird, not as ‘...evangelistic preachers sent out to save individual souls for some unearthly paradise. They were couriers proclaiming a national emergency and conducting a referendum on national survival.’ (Caird NT Theol p 361)

Jesus, then, was calling Israel to repentance, to return to the ways of God. Will you come and follow me? And still he calls.

Luke knew that. He wrote his gospel possibly sometime around the 80s, and the contours of the political landscape had shifted dramatically. Luke looked out on a very different world. The Empire itself was shaken. After Nero had committed suicide in 69 CE there had been four claimants fighting for the imperial throne. At a more local level, the Jews had rebelled in 66 and wars raked the land until 70 when Rome established its authority, razed the Temple and gutted all Jewish institutions, just as Jesus had predicted. And no one alive could have escaped the shock and the news of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. Wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes and disasters were the *lingua franca*. Jesus’ words took on a new meaning against that context. Not so much follow my way, but endure. There will be wars. There will be rebellions. There will be earthquakes. We know. We are living through them. And given the breakup of the old order we know about arrest and persecution too.

By the time Luke put pen to gospel paper, he had been Paul’s travelling companion, and he knew first-hand about being handed over to synagogues and prisons, and being brought before governors and kings. Paul had felt each of those on his pulses. Maybe it was because Luke had experienced that life of the church after the resurrection and had witnessed some of the wonders of the life of the church in *Acts* (which is of course his second volume) that he inserts some words of Jesus which none of the other evangelists record. Jesus says, ‘You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish.’ And then he returns to the script with words that are in all three synoptic gospels, ‘By your endurance you will gain your souls.’ (21:17-19). Well, Luke was the historian who recorded the stoning of Stephen, the persecution of Peter and the multiple sufferings of Paul. If anyone knew that it was literally untrue that ‘not a single hair of your head will perish’, it was Luke. But what he had also seen were the first shoots of the remarkable way in which the church was beginning to uproot and supplant Roman society, and his confidence is that God’s kingdom will be established, and that in Christ’s eternity, none will perish, and by endurance you may gain your soul.

Jesus was under no illusions about the world, the dissonance between intent and outcome, between community safety and war, between trust and betrayal. All these were signs of a time out of joint, of God written out of the script. We’ve looked at that on the grand political scale, but days after Jesus spoke of betrayal within families, by relatives and friends, Judas walked out into the night. That dissonance, that sinfulness, that unsafeness can poison even the safest of spaces. Endurance isn’t just a macro business of lamenting popularism and decrying xenophobia as it cripples our politics, it’s also a micro business of making sure that within our homes, our families, our churches, there is space for all and each and every one is cherished for their uniqueness and the love that God has for them.

Enduring in Christ's love, in the kingdom's life. Not a bad word as the Christian year enters its final fortnight. Today the words of Malachi remind us of Christ's prophetic heritage – '...the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble' (Mal 4:1). The winnowing, the division, the call to righteousness and the ways of God. Next week, the feast of Christ the King, and then Advent, and then Malachi's words, 'But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings', will raise our eyes to the wonder of God's grace as we sing Charles Wesley's words

Hail, the heaven born Prince of Peace!

Hail the Sun of Righteousness!

Light and life to all he brings,

Risen with healing in his wings.

Until then, as the year begins to turn – endure. And maybe I won't put in my protest to the Preachers' Union.

Amen.