

## Sermon 13<sup>th</sup> November 2022

**Readings:** Isaiah 65:17-25 & Luke 21:5-19

Well, we have come to the end of another church year. Many of you will be familiar with the church's calendar year because many of you have lived and worshipped through it for decades, but here is a recap. The church year begins right at the end of November with Advent, the season of preparation and expectation for the coming of Christ, past, present, and future. The church year then moves through Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and into what is now called After Pentecost, not very original but better than its older title of ordinary time.

There is of course nothing ordinary about those months between Pentecost and Advent, for they are the times when we recall our faith and consider how we as the people of God relate to Christ's mission in the world. Today though, right at the end of the church year, we hear two readings that focus on the end; our OT reading comes at the end of the book of Isaiah and contains a vision of the end or perhaps more correctly, just after the end. Our NT reading is an end times passage, an apocalypse, which simply means to pull the lid off something, to reveal something, hence the title of the last book in the NT, Revelation. End times passages are difficult and require a wise and holistic approach, and that is the approach we will take, but first let's sit with the Isaiah reading for a while.

At the beginning of Isaiah, in the first few chapters of the book, the prophet is given a vision of impending disaster. God's people, who the prophet describes as being laden with iniquity, have forsaken God and as a result Isaiah foresees the country lying desolate, and its cities burnt to the ground. Historically we know that around this time God's people in the kingdom of Judah revolted against the powerful Assyrians so Isaiah attempts to offer them wise counsel; turn back to God, stop doing evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, help those who are doing it tough. Basically wake up to yourselves and stop being selfish idiots. It's not easy being a prophet, because no one likes to be told off or told they are doing wrong and sadly despite the prophet's warnings things don't seem improve much. Right at the very end of the book of Isaiah we read once again a warning to those who will not turn to the Lord but in the middle of all these warnings and dire predictions of devastation there is something extraordinary and wonderful in this book of the bible, a book which is quoted a total of 411 times in the NT.

Dotted throughout the book of Isaiah are words of hope, visions of a new heaven and a new earth, for example Isaiah 11, the peaceful kingdom which we looked at a few weeks ago. These promises of a better world give voice to hope against all the odds, against the backdrop of wars, natural disasters, violence, greed, and oppression. Despite the fickleness of humans God will bring about the coming of the peaceful kingdom. This is something we pray for every time we say the Lord's prayer, every time we say the words, 'May your kingdom come'. Like Isaiah, we too have a vision of the world that could be and will be despite all the chaos around us.

The passage we have heard from Isaiah this morning was a message for God's people returning from exile in Babylon and they too were in the middle of chaotic situation. After 70 years in exile God's people were beginning to resettle back into their homeland. Many of these exiles would have been born in captivity in Babylon, they would have been uncertain of the way ahead and everything would have been foreign to them. The children of those

who had remained behind in Judah during the 70 years of exile would have also struggled to come to terms with the influx of returned citizens, the task of rebuilding the nation, the Temple, and their faith. To make matters worse many of these people would have strayed away from the one true God, Yahweh, and worshipped pagan gods, so you could say things were a bit of a mess. Into this messy situation Isaiah warns, chastises, and blesses the people with words of hope.

We could also call the period of time in which Jesus lived messy and chaotic. The Jewish people longed to see glory days of King David come into being once again, they lived in hope for a messiah to appear, a king who would overthrow the Roman Governor and the armies of the Empire and sit upon the throne of Israel. When Jesus tells his disciples that the 'Temple will be destroyed, that not one stone will be left on another; that every one of them will be thrown down' they would have been confused and perhaps fearful, it is no wonder they ask the obvious question 'when will this happen'. Biblical historians tell us that Luke writes his account of Jesus life, some seventy to eighty years after Christ's resurrection. By this time the author has seen the temple destroyed by the Romans as retribution for a Jewish uprising. It is also quite possible that he has witnessed or heard accounts of Jesus' original disciples being persecuted, betrayed, or put to death.

If we were to write a job description for those original disciples would we be honest about the potential risks, would it go something like this: live a life of wandering, see the world, with no possessions, no home, proclaiming a message of hope that some will hear and respond to and come to have faith and some will hear and respond to by dragging you into prison, beating you and possibly chopping off your head. And yet here we are some two thousand years later in church, because they did what they were called to do despite all the odds, thanks be to God. God's plan of reconciliation with all creation and Christ's message of love cannot and will not be stopped, it will be so.

Seen against this promise the signs of the coming of the Son of Man are more like guarantees yet for many this passage could be read as a terrifying apocalypse, terrifying for those who do not hold the vision of God's kingdom and even for some Christians who read this passage too narrowly and become obsessed with the end times. For those of us who hold the kingdom vision and all of scripture in mind these words are clearly not to be used as some kind of mathematical equation to pinpoint the exact date and time or even decade or century of the end. We know that day, is known only to God (Matthew 24:36-38). It should also be obvious to everyone who has not been hiding under a rock, that war, earthquakes, famine and plague, all sorts of disasters have been with us all along. Each and every generation faces its own kind of mess.

When I watch the news I often feel overwhelmed by the mess the world is in. We probably all feel this, yet I wonder is this the way things have always been. Does the mess feel worse because there are more people alive on the planet at this time than ever before, more people, more problems? I just don't know but I do feel that the words of hope found in Christ and the vision of better world promised in Scripture is needed now, more than ever before.

The church of today also needs to hear over and over again the promise of the new heaven and the new earth because it is also in a bit of a mess, at least in prosperous wealthy nations

like ours. Everything has changed around us, and we cannot keep up. Like Israel we have seen glory days, days when the pews were full, the Sunday school was bursting at the seams and budgets were healthy. What is it that will keep us going?

We must hold the vision, the promise of a better, fairer, kinder world and like Jesus disciples hear our Lord say to us "I will Be with You Always Even Unto the End of the World." ( Matthew 28:20). We need to be reminded over and over that our labour is not in vain, regularly attending worship, dedicating time to God in prayer and study, welcoming others into the church family, offering hospitality, volunteering, telling someone your reason for hope in the Lord, all these things are not done in vain.

To finish today, I invite you to say with me the following verses from Isaiah 12 as a statement of faith, and as words of hope and reassurance.

**Surely God is our salvation;**

**We will trust and not be afraid.**

**The Lord, the Lord himself, is our strength and our defence;**

**he has become our salvation.**

**With joy we will draw water**

**from the wells of salvation**

**Amen.**