Sermon for 1st Advent Year C

Readings: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

i

“Here, I know you!” Those were the words a woman shouted out across the lounge of a Residential Home for the elderly in September 2002. The “you” she had recognised was her brother, Bert, whom she had not seen in 60 years. As children they had been put into foster care and had been split up, never to have met again for 60 years.

As they started to swap stories, they discovered that they had lived all their lives within two miles of each other in Manchester, but had never bumped in to each other. They had actually been living in the same Residential Home for the last 9 months and never met, because Bert normally used the other lounge and other dining room. He had come into the main lounge because of some work being done in his usual one. They also discovered that they each had a daughter called Sophie who are both nurses.

**For 60 years they had lived within 2 miles, attended some of the same events, walked the same streets. They were always brother and sister; but they just didn’t know it and didn’t live like it. But it had always been true.**

“Here, I know you!” Will these be the first words we say when we stand before God’s throne on the day of judgement? We will have that vague recognition that this is the presence that has fleetingly touched our lives in moments of great crisis and great joy? Will we recognise God as the presence that we have sensed just beyond our grasp, yet also somewhere deep and unnamed within us? Will seeing God face to face be like seeing a long-lost relative again? Or are we better acquainted than that?

Well, God will know us and know us through and through. God who launched the cosmos and threw the world into space will be there to meet us at the end. God is Alpha and Omega the world’s beginning and its end: my and your beginning and our end.

Whether we have lived this life in the knowledge that we are God’s children, or whether we have lived in ignorance of God, or even having rejected God, at our end we will find the truth of the matter. God will still be our God if God exists and saying you do not believe in him will not change that reality one iota. To be fair about it, we should also admit that God will not exist just because we want him to; but we believe that because of Jesus we can have full confidence that God not only exists, but wants to know us and one day we will see God, whether we wish to or not, as we stand before the judgement seat of the Almighty.

ii

It’s not easy talking about the end of the world, but that has never stopped us from doing so. Such talk comes into fashion and then goes out for a while, but it keeps on coming back, for the human mind strains towards that final frontier of our destiny – what happens at the end of all things?

This notion of the end of the world had been in and out of fashion a number of times in the Jewish tradition. At the time of Jesus, it was in fashion again. In Luke 21 we have an example of that language – much of it taken from earlier expressions and writings in the Jewish scriptures.

The moon and stars falling from the heavens and the raging of the seas was a common way of imagining the momentous events. Even today’s scientists like to have a go by speculating about the collapse of space-time, or the cosmic disasters waiting in space to destroy our planet. For Luke, however, God and his Son, Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God play central roles – unlike the offerings of today’s scientists.

If we read Luke 21 from verse 5 to the end – we will see how our passage fits in. Luke’s general position is finely balanced. Jesus wanted to refute the apocalyptic fervour of some contemporary groups that assumed the end of the world was just around the corner – and would therefore do their best to hurry the apocalypse along if necessary through their rebellious fight with Rome – and yet Jesus wanted to affirm that there would be and End and a final Judgement – but that it wouldn’t be just yet and some of those who thought they were in God’s good books would find out they were not and some of those expected to be cast out, would be welcomed home.

Indeed, it’s even more subtle than that; for Jesus wanted to say that the judgement is already taking place within history, here and now, based on how people receive him and the ones he sends with the Good News of the Kingdom. Those who receive the Holy Spirit are already citizens of heaven and receiving a foretaste of the banquet to come.

Luke lists the signs that Jesus obviously mentioned throughout his preaching; firstly – there will be false prophets trying to create a false end of the world through insurrection against Rome. Secondly, the disciples of Jesus will be persecuted. Thirdly, Jerusalem will be surrounded by foreign troops and the temple and city will be laid to waste. All of this will be signs that the judgement is coming and the kingdom of God is about to arrive – and yet this will not be the end of the world – that is still to come.

Luke, writing after AD70 when Jerusalem and the temple have been destroyed, knows that the judgement and the kingdom are already at work in the world, but also knows that the age of the church, when the Gospel is taken to the four corners of the earth, has a long and indeterminate time to go.

Luke is trying to balance his argument to reflect what Jesus said. No, the end of the world is not yet, but judgement is already here. Heaven still awaits far off, yet you can receive a taste of it now. No, don’t trust the false signs proclaimed by the political and religious charlatans, but that yes, there are certain signs Jesus will give that you may read that signal God is at work and at hand.

iii

Advent is a time to prepare ourselves for Christ’s coming. As we build up to celebrate Christ’s first coming at Bethlehem, we use the season of Advent to prepare ourselves for the day of his Second Coming and the Judgement it will bring. As we anticipate Advent will once again flow into the joyous celebration of Christmas, so we hope our earthly life will lead to the joyous celebration of heaven. Advent, alongside the season of Lent, is a time for taking stock and making sure we are still on track.

It is timely to make sure that celebrating and feasting on the good things of life has not lulled our spirits to sleep. Are we so focused on the things of this world that we lose sight of the life to come? We, of all people, should never fall victim to the blandishments of this world, for we should already have a foretaste of the life to come through the Holy Spirit who is given to us.

Nor should we lose our faith because of any testing and painful times we might experience in this life. We are the followers of a crucified God. The world rejected him; it might easily reject us too. Christ had to give up his life to gain the kingdom of heaven – we might be called to do the same.

The Good News is that Jesus tells us we need not fear that day when we stand before God’s throne. God has already stood before us in Jesus; God in Jesus has demonstrated that God wishes to receive us, forgive us, welcome us home like the prodigal children we are.

In Christ we see a glimpse of the God who heals the sick, raises the dead, treasures the widow’s mite, sets an innocent child in the centre of society, makes our humble gift of loaves and fishes feed the world.

Yet all the dross, all the ruinous, harmful ugliness of our lives, God will burn away. Such judgement is less to be feared than welcomed. Such a judgement, through Christ, becomes a healing rather than a terrifying punishment.

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