Sermon for 33rd in Ordinary Year C

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

i

The temple in Jerusalem was four times bigger than St Paul’s cathedral in London; it could accommodate thousands of worshippers to rival St Paul’s Outside the Walls in Rome; each stone block of its base measured 40 feet by 12 feet; its roof was covered in gold; its doors were of best cedar wood; and inside was a traditional symbol of Israel – a vine - and a bunch of grapes on the golden vine was the height of a man.

No wonder the disciples were impressed in Luke 21:5. How could their little band of ragamuffin disciples hope to compete with such a well-established and powerful faith? King Herod the Great had spent 47 years on this property refurbishment – (probably because he too had to send all his paperwork to the Property Committee in Christchurch/London/Manchester ...supply your own location. This is too good an opportunity not to have a dig at your Property Trustees – every denomination seems to enjoy the sport). It was still a work in progress when Jesus visited with his disciples.

Yet all of this magnificence was doomed. The immediate context of this prophecy was the looming rebellion against imperial Rome, already simmering away in Jesus’ time. When Luke writes his Gospel account, the first of three wars has already broken out and Jerusalem lay in ruins – this magnificent temple just an expensive pile of rubble.

There are also touches of apocalyptic rhetoric and so perhaps some material more suited to speaking of the climactic End of the world has crept into this speech as well.

As for the temple’s destruction in AD70 in the Jewish-Roman war, there are some valuable lessons to be learnt which some churches could also heed today.

One of the great mistakes the Jewish leaders were making at this time was that they had turned the temple into a bastion. Their religious life had become a self-indulgent retreat from the world with all its messy, compromised economic and political realities. The temple had become a place where various factions of Judaism could wallow in escapist fantasies about rebelling against Rome, about a warrior-king Messiah who would lead them to victory.

They had barred the temple gates metaphorically from the inconvenient realities they didn’t want to face and they had literally barred the doors to gentile voices, to an extent, to women’s voices, and certainly to the mediating voice of realism such as the voice of Jesus.

They had God safely locked away in the holy of holies guarded by an elite priesthood and bound in legal red tape tightly tied by the Scribes and guarded by the Pharisees. At the right moment, they would unleash God and set him onto their enemies like a divine Rottweiler. Not that the various factions could agree for more than five minutes on what that would mean.

God calls us to build a Church, not a bunker. Bunker mentality is where fanaticism is bred.

Jesus came and set God free – allowing Samaritans, women, the crippled, even the tax collectors open access. Indeed, where 2 or 3 meet in his name, there is God in the midst of them.

The Church needs to be careful not to retreat into a bunker mentality and lose contact with the world. It’s tempting to wish certain ideas or questions circulating in the world would just go away, because they cause Christians such strife, but questions about gay and lesbian relationships, abortion, the fight against terrorism and so on will not just go away. Either the Church addresses these issues, despite the internal conflicts which they cause, or we risk becoming an irrelevant side show. Or worst still, a breeding ground for fanatics.

Many Christians are tempted to such bunker mentality because they are frightened. They are frightened of a world that seems to be turning its back on their faith and apparently prospering nonetheless. Malachi will have something to say about this later.

ii

The situation addressed in 2 Thessalonians 3 is another variation on this bunker mentality theme. Whilst Paul tells the Corinthians that “those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Cor 9:14), the situation in 2 Thessalonians 3 is somewhat different.

Here some people have decided to use the Church as a refuge from the world and as an escape from hard work. They have taken the Christian duty of care for others and exploited it cynically for their own advantage. They are living off the good will and charity of the Church and doing nothing for themselves. They are wasting their lives in idleness.

There is a hard truth in this. Every minister will know familiar sob stories employed to prey on the good nature of a Christian conscience to extort money for nefarious purposes. Only yesterday I was in a meeting in which we were told that certain families are known to change their name at each different *food bank* so as to extort more than their fair share out of the charitable agencies trying to support the poor. It is a distasteful side to human character that we would like to ignore. It’s easier for us if we idolise the poor and shelter ourselves from the inconvenient reality of human behaviour. Rather that than have to make invidious choices about who is genuine and whose need is not.

You can find biblical texts to support cooperative, socialist principles of mutual care and accountability, but you can also find biblical texts to support the notion of individual freedom which respect the right of individuals to work harder than others, risk more than others and reap greater rewards. Whichever reading is your political preference, a balance must be struck between these competing ideals.

Free enterprise that lets the weakest fall by the wayside whilst the elite few are enriched beyond imagination must be condemned.

Collectivist systems that restrict human freedom and creativity to such an extent that life is squeezed out of people and the economy must be equally resisted. The balance is not easy and what emphasis is required in any given spot at any given time is for the political class to discern.

But everyone, according to 2 Thessalonians 3, must be allowed to make their best contribution to the collective good of society and those who are tempted to idleness and to live off the charity of others whilst leading feckless lives, must be compelled to shoulder their responsibilities.

Economic welfare systems that take care of the vulnerable, but also keep them dependent and therefore poor, are hardly what Christian social teaching is advocating.

God has given gifts to all his children – and I speak as a brother in law to a mentally disabled woman. Everyone deserves to have their contribution valued, however small, and the opportunity to make it. Those who are tempted not to bother when they could must be forced to participate. Grandma used to say, “The devil makes work for idle hands.” She knew what she was talking about. Why is it so politically difficult to give a helping hand to those who need it, whilst allowing no one a free, but soul-destroying ride?

iii

Malachi urges us all to keep on no matter how hopeless the task appears to be. Getting the balance right between care for the vulnerable and individual responsibility to contribute to the common good seems forever out of our reach, but we can’t stop trying.

The world keeps throwing up new questions and new dilemmas which we struggle to understand and the Church is often split on what the gospel response should be.

In the West, many folk have given up on the Church completely and that can make the struggles of a Christian conscience even more exhausting and dispiriting – for who wants to wrestle with Bible, conscience and Christian brother and sister when the world won’t show the slightest interest whatever the Church has to say?

Such thinking leads to the bunker mentality; faith becomes an escape from harsh reality. Churches batten down the hatches and turn into religious sects, keeping out dissenting, troubling voices.

Malachi addresses an earlier time in Jewish history before Christ when such despondency was the flavour of the day. After the return from Exile and the rebuilding of the temple (the one Herod the Great later refurbished), religious practice went into a rapid decline. Priests were just going through the motions, the people drifted away from the faith, and all of it seemed to be stagnating. They seem to have learned nothing from their time of Exile.

Malachi address this period of *ennui* by calling on the people to remain steadfast, by reminding them that at the End it will actually matter whether you fulfilled your religious duties faithfully or just half-heartedly.

And to those Christians, Jews or others who may be tempted from time to time to retreat to a coterie of the like-minded and use the Church, synagogue, mosque or temple as a bunker from which to plot against the evils of the world from which they have withdrawn, Malachi urges perseverance, for God will ultimately prevail and faithfulness receive its just reward.

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