

The coming of the end: the final summons

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost — 13 November 2016
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Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Introduction

Jesus is in Jerusalem. The journey is over. In our readings we have missed the entry and the early conflicts with the authorities in the city. An air of sadness permeates the story.

Around him people are speaking of the great beauty of the Temple. It was without doubt one of the great buildings of the ancient world, a product of Herod the Great's energy for building and his political ambition.

The destruction of the Temple, vv. 5-7

Jesus is in the Temple confines. He has been confronting the temple authorities about his ministry and mission and their rejection of it.

He has already wept over the temple (19.4–14). This is not a moment of weakness. He has warned all the way through this Gospel that judgement would come to the temple if the people did not repent. They had become so spiritually blind that they could not see God when he came. God was visiting them and calling them to Godself but there was so much static and noise in their communication channels that they could not hear.

He had cleansed the temple. We usually interpret this as fit of pique at the commercialisation of the temple. It was nothing of the sort. The Temple leaders knew what it was about. It was a rejection of their power and their leadership. It was a rejection of the direction in which these ecclesiastical brigands were leading the people. It was a sign of judgement, and the authorities had to take it seriously. If the people took it seriously then the leaders might be in trouble.

It is neither anger nor pique that we read into the story, but tears are what we should remember. God weeps.

Even closer, just before this passage begins, Jesus commends the poor widow who put her two small coppers in the temple offering. Remember, "blessed are the poor"; "woe to you who are rich". God's way of measuring reality is not ours. He turns everything upside down. Size does not matter.

And now people want to be reassured by the size and beauty of the temple.

What does God weep over? That this beautiful building would be laid waste stone upon stone until nothing of the superstructure was left. Its beauty, its craft, would be lost forever.

But there was much more than this. This temple was the sign of the presence of God, a sacrament. This was the place that God had set aside to meet with his people. This would be no more.

For us it is hard to grasp. The very central core of the people, their identity and integrity, their meaning and their mission was tied to this place. For us it would like destroying the war memorial, the parliament, the high court, Melbourne Cricket Ground, the institutions that define us.

Just this week I listened to an interview with Brendan Nelson, Director of the War Memorial. Friday 11 November was the 75th anniversary of the opening of the Memorial and the 98th

anniversary of the signing of the Armistice in 1918. This is how he described the Memorial: the “soul of the nation”, a “living institution”, “therapeutic for veterans”—and from some repeat visitors, “this where we learn to be Aussies.” This is the Temple.

But why might this happen? All through his ministry Jesus has been signifying another way. His miracles, his healings, his exorcisms, his teachings all point in another direction to the one that the people seem to be taking.

Many believed that because the Romans ruled them and a non-Jewish Edomite family of Herod assisted them, then God had not yet fulfilled the promise of a new heavens and earth, a new freedom. They believed that the exile was not yet fully over.

That is why people listened so carefully to Jesus when he preached about a coming kingdom. Jesus was saying that the time had come for the exile to be over and that they could be the first generation to share in God’s coming. In the beginning of the Gospel he said plainly,

The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. (4.18–19)

They were listening with ears open. But there was a lot of clutter that made it difficult to hear. They believed that the only way forward was to keep themselves pure and hate the foreigner. They believed the best way to do that was through the law. They were willing to oppress the poor and the stranger to fulfil this law. They were willing to make some people insiders and a large number of outsiders.

Most of all, they believed that the best way forward politically and religiously was through violence. Destroy the enemies within and assassinate the enemies without.

Jesus comes along and says the way to end the exile is to follow me. Practice his way of life, the way of forgiveness and mercy, the way of loving the enemy, the way of prayer and justice, the way of jubilee or setting people free from their debts, the way of renouncing xenophobia towards those outside Israel and oppression within, the way of renouncing violence. This is the meaning of the sermon on the plain or the mount. This is the meaning implicit in every action of Jesus whether it was feeding people or setting them free from demons.

He asked them to abandon their kingdom vision and follow him in his. If they refused the appeal to let go their love affair with violence and hatred and oppression, then there simply would be consequences.

God cannot use people filled up with hate and violence and oppression. So at the end Jesus weeps. At this last hour he would become the victim of this hatred, violence and oppression. Roman and Jewish forces would come together at this point. His resurrection would be the vindication of Jesus’ vision of the kingdom. No resurrection, then no vindication, no hope; all victory to violence. These are the issues at stake.

The signs, vv. 8-11

The disciples are naturally worried and ask for signs. Jesus gives them nothing specific, only general signs of distress and violence in the world. People looking for particularities here are quite mistaken. There are none.

Violence will continue to rule. Disturbances in the heaven will be a metaphorical reminder that the world has rejected the message of forgiveness, mercy, prayer, justice, reconciliation freedom and jubilee.

These are simply signs of great changes. Yet nothing changes. Think of the fall of the Berlin wall. Or the Twin Towers on 9/11, Bali or the Arab Spring among other things. Hope, and then convulsion. It is as though the earth shakes and trembles.

What is he is saying? He is saying that living today is the only focus. Speculation is a deflection from the tasks of the present. The future is present now.

And what does this mean to those who follow the way of Jesus?

The life of the disciple, vv. 12-19

There is the temptation to deflection

Speculative theology and fear mongering about the future and the end have ever been with us. Do not be astray, Jesus says. Forget them. Don't chase after them. But most of all, never be afraid. Living in fear is the sign of a false religion.

The disciples' life is one of trust and praise. Fear, chasing speculations, takes the focus away. Trust and worship focus us back again; so the reading from Isaiah 12.

The persecutions

They will experience the violence themselves. They will be marked out as undesirables. They will experience betrayal, even family betrayal. Right across the world today believers are persecuted because of the way of peace. They rarely reach the newspapers but it happens to our brothers and sisters every day of every year.

A practical life

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul has warned the church against speculators just as Jesus had warned. And his response is practical. In our reading today he is intently practical.

Work, don't sponge on the common purse, don't live a disordered life. Don't let your life become slack, pointless, meaningless.

This is the way to live in the light of the future. Nothing spectacular, simply practical living of the kingdom contributing to the Christian witness in work, mission and giving.

Questions about the mission and work

After this long study of Luke, here are the questions I have to answer. Can we hear the prophetic voice of Jesus above the din of violence, xenophobia and hatred? How can we live the way of peace and wholeness? How can we witness to that between ourselves and in the wider community? Are we willing to warn our contemporaries that to reject God's invitation is to court disaster?

Are we willing to trust God and take the chance to tell our story? Are we willing to carry on patiently? Are we willing to devote our lives to wisdom and learning so we will not be deceived?

And when we do evangelism will we make sure we set out plainly Jesus' agenda for living now? Will we avoid the easy evangelism that makes the Gospel an escape from hell and a security for some eternal bliss in the far-distant future? Will we clearly set out that repentance is letting go of our agendas and taking up Jesus' agenda? Will we live like that? Only then is our evangelism and work worth anything.