

Sermon on Advent Sunday, 1 December 2024

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Luke 21 v 32: *"Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."*

'George, how's your house extension coming on?' asked a vicar one Sunday morning to one of her parishioners after morning service. 'Oh, don't ask' George replied, grumpily. 'It should have been finished last month but we're still living on a building site. The tradesmen keep promising they'll be back tomorrow to finish the job, but then they don't turn up for days. They're all the same, you just can't trust them'. 'Oh George, I'm sure they're not all so bad,' replied the Vicar, who always tried to see the good side in everyone '– after all, Jesus was in the building trade you know, he was a carpenter.' 'Yes,' said George, 'and Jesus promised he'd be coming back to finish the job, didn't he? And we've been waiting 2,000 years for him.'

Our Gospel reading reminds us firmly that the season of Advent through most of the history of the Church was not a simple countdown to Christmas, to the celebration of the first coming of Christ to earth at Bethlehem. Advent was a time of fasting, sobriety, penitence and preparation for the second coming of Christ, 'the Son of Man appearing in a cloud with great power and glory' and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

"Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

Ironically, for the Advent season we change our Communion liturgy at St Andrew's and St Mary's to a version that leaves out this ancient formulation of faith.

If Good Friday and Easter are the big days for Christ has died and Christ is risen, then today, Advent Sunday, is the big day for Christ will come again.

What do we really make of this promise? "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

The confident belief of all the early followers of Jesus was that his return was imminent – a matter of weeks or months or, at most, a few years.

I am pretty sure that in every generation since, a smaller or larger group of Christians has convinced itself that those words in Luke's Gospel were directed prophetically at their age. "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." They understood the signs in the sky, the storms and swelling seas, the wars and rumours of wars in their own era, as God's sign that Christ's triumphant return would be in their lifetime. They all have one thing in common. They've all been wrong – so far!

So, what was Jesus trying to tell his followers? And what might he be trying to tell us? What are the signs for our times?

When I was a child, there was one sign in the heavens that troubled me profoundly. Grey clouds. My great passion in life

was cricket. Long summer holidays and summer weekends were to be spent at Bradford League cricket grounds or at a county game at Park Avenue, or else sitting on the beach on Bridlington with the family radio tuned to Test Match Special. There were three words that hung like the sword of Damocles over my often rather fragile happiness, especially when the game was up in Manchester or Leeds: Rain stopped play.

There was a popular saying amongst the regulars at Old Trafford – the cricket ground, not the soccer stadium: If you can see the Pennines from the Stretford Road end, it's going to rain. If you can't see the Pennines, it's raining already!

Like the rainclouds above Manchester, the signs of the times are always with us. Tragically, they are the same for our generation as they have been for every generation back to Christ and on back to Adam. There are wars and threats of wars. There always have been. Political and economic structures crack and shudder. There are plagues – but we call them pandemics now. There are extreme weather events, floods and violent storms. People live in fear.

And when we see the signs of the times, we too have Jesus' promise: The Kingdom of God is very near. The same promise he has given to every generation of believers.

"Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." For the early Christians, the return of Jesus and the Kingdom of God was not just about now – or at least very soon – but also about here on earth! Only as the generation of Jesus' time begins to pass away does the Church

begin the slow migration of the Kingdom of God from Earth to a place above the sky.

The earliest recorded Christian teachers – St Paul and the other writers of the Epistles – have to wrestle with the issue of faithful disciples whose lives have ended before the return of Christ. How will they experience the promised reward for their faithfulness? Maybe that is one reason why the Church has often seemed to make our religion too much of a question about what happens to us when we die?

But the Good News that Jesus preaches is about what happens when we live, and when we let others live, fulfilling lives.

What was it old George said back at the start of the sermon? 'He's kept us waiting for 2,000 years'. Waiting, in our modern, impatient world, is viewed negatively. Waiting time is seen as dead time. Jesus does not keep us waiting in that sense.

Think, rather, of the waiter in a restaurant. One who waits – on hand and ready for when they are needed to serve. Or at a different social level, the old idea of Ladies in Waiting (and Gentlemen in Waiting), people privileged to spend their time in the presence of a Monarch.

Is that a pattern for Christian lives? On call and ready to serve our neighbours in Jesus' name. And at the same time free to savour the privilege of the presence of our God and King in our prayer and praise for a lifetime long. A lifetime to learn how to give and receive love, a lifetime to teach and learn God's wisdom and truth, a lifetime to enjoy and celebrate the

bounteous gifts of His creation, a lifetime to live justly and fairly, a lifetime to forgive and to be forgiven, a lifetime to lie back in the comforting arms of His Grace.

If that's waiting, I'm happy to wait. And to go on waiting until Jesus is ready to call time and take me to my reward, wherever it is!

Amen

