

**PREPARING FOR THE GREAT DAY (Advent Sunday)**

**(Jer. 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-38)**

The year was about AD30. Jesus and his disciples, together with thousands of pilgrims, had come to Jerusalem in time for the Passover festival. The disciples were very impressed by the great temple, especially the huge stones used in its construction. But Jesus took them aback by warning them that the temple would one day be a ruin, completely destroyed.

When would this happen? they asked. How can we be ready for such a terrible thing? Jesus gave them a series of signs pointing to the coming destruction: there would be false teachers and false Messiahs; there would be wars and violence; there would be natural disasters – famines and earthquakes; Christians would face opposition and persecution. Dramatic things, and yet they are the stuff of history. Such things seem constantly to be happening. They might be pointers to a great event, but they didn't clarify when this destruction would actually happen.

Jesus also warned that armies would surround and enter Jerusalem, and destruction would then come. Those who were wise would escape before the terrible day. Many would die, and Jerusalem would be left in ruins.

A couple of weeks ago we heard Mark's account of these things as our Gospel reading, but it was only the first part of this dramatic explanation by Jesus. Today we have heard Luke's account of the **last** part of what Jesus was saying. Over the coming year, Luke will provide most of our Gospel readings. Actually Matthew, Mark and Luke all present this talk in very similar forms. Clearly it was quite memorable.

The first part leads up to those terrible things happening in Jerusalem. But as Jesus goes on, it seems that there is another dimension to what he is saying. Jesus speaks of "signs in the sun, the moon and the stars" and confusion among the nations because of "the roaring of the sea and the waves" and the shaking of the powers of heaven. Could he be using pictorial language to describe earthly political and military events? Perhaps, but there is more to it. For when he describes the coming of the Son of Man in a cloud with power and great glory, that is surely not an

earthly event: it is something extraordinary, something supernatural. It reflects words from the Book of Daniel which we heard last Sunday.

Jesus is the unique Son of Man, given eternal power and glory and dominion by his divine Father, and here Jesus is describing the great day we often call his Second Coming, a great theme of every Advent season.

But let us go forward about 20 years to AD50. The Apostle Paul had crossed over to what we know as northern Greece. He reached the major city of Thessalonica where he preached about Jesus both in the synagogue and the market place. People were impressed by his message, and many became Christians. A church community was begun. But after a few weeks, opposition became so intense that it was turning violent. If Paul stayed, it was not only dangerous for him: it would be very dangerous for the new Christians. So Paul left and travelled south to Athens and then Corinth. But he was very concerned for the Thessalonians. He had got them started as well as he could, and now he continued to pray earnestly for them.

How were they really going? He sent Timothy his assistant to see how they were, and was thrilled to hear when Timothy returned that they were going really well. Yes, there were a few problems, and some questions to be clarified, but they were keeping going in faith and love as followers of Christ. This First Letter to the Thessalonians is his response to the news, and it shows how thrilled he was to hear of their continuing faith, and how keen he was to help and encourage and guide them as they continued as followers of Christ.

Today's little excerpt from the middle of the letter describes the joy he feels because of them, and his prayer that he will be able to see them soon, to strengthen them further.

But Paul also raises that same subject that Jesus had spoken about twenty years before in Jerusalem: the coming of the Son of Man, who is our Lord Jesus, will all the saints. Paul wants his readers to be blameless before our God and Father on that day. Now "blameless" sounds pretty challenging: surely none of us is free from blame, none of us is perfect.

But I don't think Paul is demanding perfection from us. He prays that their **hearts may be strengthened in holiness**. Holiness first of all means being distinct, being different. In a world when "me first" is more and more the normal way, we are called to be different. When having money and having things is the measure of success, we are called to think differently. When the Christian way and current community standards are moving further and further apart, we are called to be different. When we are being encouraged by so many politicians and leaders to reject those who are not like us, to refuse to be generous to those who are not like us, Paul calls us not only to love one another but to love all people.

We are to be different, but we must express that difference humbly, without being judgemental. And part of that difference is **love for one another**: a genuine commitment to our fellow Christians. We remember that church is not a place that we go to, but a community we are part of, caring for one another, encouraging one another, supporting one another.

And we are to be open to opportunities to show genuine love and care beyond the Christian family, as Jesus demonstrated in his life and ministry to those who were seen as outsiders. That most famous verse from John's Gospel reminds us that **God so loved the world**, not just the church. A life characterized by loving words and deeds, and by holy godly living, is well on the way to being blameless. And of course, we remember that Jesus through his death on the cross, has dealt with all our sin: our relationship with God, our hope, is based not on how good we are, but on how good and forgiving God is!

So let's remember that our lives are to demonstrate the reality of our faith, and to express our response to the love of God: but we do not have to pass a test of perfection to be ready for that great day. Jesus is ultimately the One who assures us that we are ready for the day he comes as Judge and Lord and Saviour.

I want to mention one more date: the year AD70. This is the year when Jesus' words about the temple were fulfilled. A few years earlier, Jewish rebels had managed to evict the Romans from Jerusalem, but the Romans were not going to leave it at that. In AD70, large numbers of Roman troops besieged the city, and eventually they entered Jerusalem, killing thousands

and thousands of people, and burning and destroying the temple. Many Christians had seen the signs and the rising tensions, as well as the preparations of the Roman armies. Remembering the words of Jesus, they had already escaped the city, which didn't endear them to Jews who survived.

That terrible event was the last of all those signs mentioned by Jesus that were to be fulfilled. For the next major event on God's agenda is actually Jesus' return. But God is patient; and Christians over the centuries have learned, and sometimes struggled to learn, that our job is not to predict the date, but simply to get on with the job of living here and now as Christ's followers. That's what Paul was telling the Thessalonians to do, and it's actually what Jesus wanted his listeners to understand. As he says, heaven and earth will one day pass away, but his words will never pass away.

What Jesus tells us is to be on guard so that the day does not catch us unexpectedly. We are to be alert at all times. Because we don't know the date, we are to live as those who are always ready. So Jesus tells us to keep clear of mere earthly priorities or human foolishness, to keep clear of drunkenness and dissipation or any of those distractions that get in the way of living as he calls us to do: we are simply to keep following Jesus.

Advent encourages us to look forward to the celebration of the coming of Jesus as a baby at Bethlehem. But it reminds us that Jesus will come again in glory to finally put things right, to judge the world, and to bring his people into his glorious kingdom. Of course, if our earthly death comes before Jesus' return, as has happened to so many Christians, we will still share in that great event. It is good to be challenged by the reality of Christ's return, but we don't have to be afraid about it. Let us simply keep going in faith, hope and love: following Jesus who has prepared the way for us, and who calls us to trust him, and to follow him in holiness and love. Amen.

*Paul Weaver*