

## Sermon - Jesus' revelation

Based on: Jeremiah 33.14-16; Luke 21.25-38

### Advent season

- Today we enter the season of Advent - a time of preparation before celebrating the Feast of the Incarnation, otherwise known as Christmas.
- Our liturgy changes a bit for the season:
  - We count the four Sundays by successively lighting the candles of the Advent wreath and start anticipating celebrating the birth of Christ once again;
  - We fast from saying the Gloria so that we can join together in saying it again at Christmas with renewed enthusiasm;
  - We shift from saying 'We believe ...' with the Nicene Creed to saying 'I believe ...' with the Apostles' Creed, to emphasise each of us attending to our individual faith relationship;
  - We include the Prayer of Humble Access just before receiving communion to emphasise our need for humility, acknowledging that our worthiness to stand before God is directly dependent on God.
- The secular world is already starting to celebrate the approaching year end, with academic studies wrapping up, and preparations for the holiday break underway.
- While on the one hand I would personally prefer to keep my Christmas celebrations for the liturgical season of Christmas - that is, the twelve days of Christmas that only begin on Christmas day - I understand the need not to be a wet blanket on other people's pre-Christmas festivities.
- Nevertheless, it is relevant for us to engage with the advent season in terms of personal reflection and preparation.

### Apokalypsis

- With that in mind, let's look at today's challenging reading from Luke's Gospel.
- Most of Chapter 21 of Luke's Gospel is a long discourse that Jesus makes when preaching to people in the temple.
- This is right at the end of his ministry, just before the events of the Last Supper, arrest, trial, torture, death and resurrection.
- In it Jesus seeks to provide a reassurance for his followers - both then and now - of what they can expect to encounter.
- The discourse is described as Apocalyptic.
- This word is taken from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which simply means revelation.
- This is why the last book of the Bible is described as the Apocalypse of John or Revelation of John.
- The words of Jesus in chapter 21 of Luke are the apocalypse or revelation of Jesus.
- Jesus makes it clear that his words are to be understood as this kind of revelation, because he quotes the prophet Daniel's revelation directly:

*As I watched in the night visions,  
I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. (Daniel 7.13)*
- The nature of the apocalyptic books like Daniel and Revelation are that they are set, not in the world as you and I see it, but in the world as God sees it.
- Indeed, in John's revelation he explicitly describes being 'caught up in the Spirit' and finding himself in the throne room of the Divine, from where he witnesses conceptual events that dramatise the final conflict between good and evil.
- Daniel describes '*watching in the night visions*', also ensuring that we understand his descriptions as from the perspective of being fully within the Divine presence.
- So what Jesus describes here is similarly from that perspective - which is why it is apocalyptic, in that it is a revelation - it has been revealed to him.

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### Symbolism of events in nature

- When John's revelation includes descriptions of dramatic weather and the upheaval of land, then this is not literally about weather events as we might experience them, but rather a metaphor for a spiritual upheaval as forces of good and evil come into conflict.
- For example, Revelation 11.19:  
*Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.*
- I remind you of the creation story at the beginning of the Bible, where initially there is chaos, but then God gradually establishes order, and ordains life.
- And the Psalmist frequently describes our Creator God in terms of his power over the natural forces of this earth.
- The disciples witness Jesus exercising God's power over the elements when he stills the storm on lake Galilee.
- And so the references Jesus makes about '*signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves*' - these are primarily metaphors for spiritual disturbances.

### 'Be on guard'

- Which is why Jesus is able to give the reassurance: '*stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*'
- The reason is that God is ultimately in control.
  - Love does overcome hate.
  - Light does overcome darkness.
  - Life does overcome death.
  - We will be redeemed, in that God's goodness overcomes evil.
- Nevertheless, Jesus not only reassures us, but also gives us a warning: '*Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life*'
- So often when people can't cope with whatever is happening in their lives, they resort to distractions - things that take their mind off whatever is distressing them.
- Dissipation is a catch all term basically referring to overindulging in sensual pleasures - getting a kick out of gambling, or sex, or eating, or any hedonistic activity, any of which might be quite acceptable within appropriate limits, but when overindulged becomes wasteful and unhealthy to body, mind or spirit.
- Drunkenness is a common form of dissipation.
- From gospel stories we can assume that Jesus enjoyed a cup of wine, but when overindulged, drunkenness can be a way of distracting oneself from the things one cannot cope with in one's own strength.
- Jesus adds a third item to his short list of the things that weigh down people's hearts: in addition to dissipation and drunkenness, he includes '*the worries of this life*' - not the reasons why we become anxious, but the giving in to anxiety itself.
- I encounter people who might present as being morally good because they would never dream of indulging in dissipation or drunkenness, but certainly indulge in ongoing worries.

### 'That day'

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- Jesus warns us not to be distracted from our faith relationship with God by indulging in these things that weigh down our hearts.
- If we do, he says, then we will not be prepared for *'that day'*.
- What is this particular *'day'* he is referring to?
- Well, just beforehand, he says: *'when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near'*.
- That is, when you see evidence of the forces of good and evil actively engaging each other, then *'you know that the kingdom of God is near'*.
- *'That day'* is when the kingdom of God is being manifestly established - is being made tangibly real to us.
- Throughout the three years of his ministry, Jesus keeps talking about the kingdom of God coming near, and then acts to make that kingdom manifestly real.
- Every time he forgives people their sins, and restores people to right relationship with God, with others, with God's creation, and especially with their own selves, Jesus is bringing the kingdom of God into their lives.
- And, at the time he is giving this discourse in the temple, he is just about to bring his action to a dramatic conclusion on the cross and through the empty tomb, to help his disciples finally comprehend what the kingdom of God is really all about.
- His disciples, who have been following him and learning from him for those few years, are then finally - at Pentecost - strengthened by God's Spirit to be able to comprehend for themselves, and thereby can finally stand before the Son of Man.
  
- Compare them with many of the religious leaders at the time whose eyes were blind to what Jesus was doing and teaching, and who missed out.
- *'That day'* came unexpectedly for them, and they were unprepared, so they could not see God's kingdom being made manifest before their very eyes, in their midst - and they lost out, because they were not alert to it.
- Even though they had the words of the prophets in the scrolls they studied, like those of Jeremiah which we heard earlier:  

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'* (Jeremiah 33.14-16)
  
- So let us during this season of Advent, each ask God to see where we are allowing distractions of overindulgence in any form, and the worries of this life - where we are allowing these to weigh down our hearts.
- Let us each ask God for his strength so that we may be able to stand straight and lift up our heads in his presence.
- And let us each ask God to show us where he is executing justice and righteousness in our own lives and circumstances, and inspire us to join with him there, so that we each may know how the kingdom of God has come near for us as well.