

Sunday between 13th and 19th November [33]

Luke 21:5-19

The shops can't wait to tell us that its nearly Christmas, but for Christians that means that advent is even closer, and we need to recognise advent as more than just an opportunity for Christmas shopping, but rather a Church season all of its own.

So much so, that the Church has designated these last few Sundays as a countdown to advent, today being the second before advent. It is also sometimes known as kingdom season, a sort of season of its own highlighting the fact that the end of the church year is approaching, and the beginning of a new one on the horizon. So it makes sense that the readings for the next couple of weeks speak of endings and beginnings.

Today's gospel is very concerned with the temple, the ultimate symbol of the Jewish faith and very much seen as the most holy place on earth for the Jewish people. They had the temple entwined through their history and their faith and it was a magnificent building in which you could see a glimpse of eternity.

The temple was a symbol of steadfastness and stability. There it was in stone, huge and at the time of Jesus, it had been standing in that form, that is the 2nd temple, since 515 BC and before that, Solomon's temple had been built in 957 BC and there was a 71 year gap after it was destroyed by the Babylonians before that 2nd temple was open and used. So at the time of Jesus that temple had stood there for around 500 years and a temple had been there for the best part of 1000 years and people put their faith in the building as much as in the religion that was practiced there.

Yet here was Jesus saying, no 2 stones will remain on top of each other, it will all be destroyed. This prophecy would have been disturbing to those who heard it. No one would have remembered the destruction of the previous temple, but Hebrew scripture is full of stories of what it is to be a displaced people, sojourners in a foreign land, and to have the land of Israel taken from them. This was a scary prophecy, but one that had a history and spoken at a time of occupation it would have felt particularly close to home.

Indeed the temple was destroyed around 40 years after this prophecy and many of Jesus' original disciples would have been around to see it. That must have had a significant effect on them! But Jesus doesn't prophesy the destruction of the temple to induce panic or depression. He talks of it in term of not wanting his disciples to be led astray by that or other acts of persecution, warfare or natural disaster. He was telling them that what was to come would not be easy but his final words were words of encouragement, that none of this would affect their relationship with God.

Fast forward to us here in this place, perhaps this church or others you have been attached to have survived their own history of disasters (maybe flooding, fires or other incidents), and it is easy to think it will always be here for us and those to come, we are blessed by its presence and the opportunity to worship here. But what if it were not here, what if we didn't have the building to have faith in, where would we be then?

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that lots of people become attached to particular buildings and if their "church" is no longer in use for whatever reason, then they are unwilling to go to another. There are lots of reasons for this some plausible, others less so, but church attendance isn't compulsory so we have to accept people's choice. Yet it is the case that some people regularly get confused between church as building and church as community.

We are also very fortunate here in Australia, we are free to practice our religion without fear of persecution. And yet, so many people will attest to believing in God, even God as revealed in the Christian faith but will be unwilling to commit to regular worship and the giving of themselves to become part of a Christian community. Again, there are lots of reasons but

ultimately it comes down to being willing to make the commitment, to prioritise God before self and the distractions of life. Sometimes we are a bit spoilt with enjoying the freedoms we do, so that just as we are free to worship so we are quite complacent about it.

The evidence shows that the Christian church most effective is the Christian church that worships under persecution. The stories in modern times of the most remarkable Christians are those for whom life was beyond difficult, because they become an inspiration to the rest of us who have it so easy.

One example, but by no means the only one, is the Anglican church of Bangladesh. The church of Bangladesh is a tiny minority church in an overwhelmingly Muslim country but their church, in spite of its poverty, does so much more practical work, and inspiring work than many other dioceses. In response to their faith, which they have to fight to practice and are persecuted for doing so, these Christians have programmes for feeding children, educating mothers, hospitals, aged care and all of these helping people of all faiths and none, of the poorest backgrounds without question. They are so possessed by the joy of the gospel each one of them supports in whatever way they can, the church's efforts to bring about the kingdom in Bangladesh.

When we consider such places of persecution and the commitment to their work it is easy to feel ashamed. In the Anglican churches of the western world, we are concerned with who can be bishops, is it women or only men, and who can be married and what people's relationship are like and all sorts of other things that we have the luxury to debate because our basic needs are met and we have freedom to meet as a church.

But the days are coming, says the lord, when we will have to answer for our faith. We don't know when, we can't know when. Just as the disciples had no idea when Jesus spoke that they would see the destruction of the temple in their lifetime, neither do we know when the world will change for us. But we do know how the world is now, we are aware that we live in the midst of war and natural disaster and persecution of our brothers and sisters around the world. So the question for today is, if we cannot know the future how will we live in this present reality?

A pastor once issued this challenge to a congregation, if the Christian faith were illegal here would the authorities find enough evidence to convict you? What a challenging question!

As we fast approach the end of another church year may we take time to reflect on our journey this past year, whatever bad or good has befallen us, how has our faith held up? Jesus said, not a hair on your head will perish, by your endurance you will gain your eternal soul. May these words of comfort inspire us for all that is to come.