

Sermon

Sunday 29 November 2020  
Advent Sunday

Lesson

St Mark 13: 24 - 37

Our Gospel lesson this morning is spectacularly dramatic:

The sun will be darkened  
The moon will not give her light  
The stars will come falling from the sky  
The celestial powers will be shaken.

Having left the temple precincts, Jesus made His way to the Mount of Olives, Mount Olivet, where He sat down with His disciples and began to teach. In apocalyptic language, He spoke of terrible upheaval and the fearful destruction of Jerusalem and its holy temple. Apocalyptic language is typically hyperbolic: momentous, life-threatening and urgent.

On the previous day causing a great commotion, Jesus had overturned the tables of the moneychangers. Pointedly, He told them, “Does not Scripture say, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer.....But you have made it a robbers’ cave!’” The tension contained in these passages of Scripture is palpable. By AD70, the Romans had razed

Jerusalem to the ground. Today in Jerusalem, the 'Wailing Wall' is a portion of what remains standing of the ancient temple.

Seated on Mount Olivet, which is situated to the east of Jerusalem, Jesus and His disciples would have enjoyed an uninterrupted view of the city. Years before, it was on Mount Olivet that King David had wept before going into battle against his son, Absalom. In the Book of Zechariah, again in apocalyptic language, we read that, one day, *God* will stand on Mount Olivet. As Jesus and the disciples looked down the mountain, they will have seen the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Book of Acts, it is from the Mount of Olives that Jesus, the Risen Christ, ascends into heaven. This place, this holy mountain, was imbued with sacred history and spiritual significance. Jesus spoke of the sun and moon being darkened and the stars falling from the sky.

Steeped in His own rich religious tradition, the apocalyptic words of Jesus were drawn from the Tanakh, our Old Testament. First uttered in different political circumstances, the poetic prophets of Isaiah,

Ezekiel and Joel spoke of the ‘Day of the LORD’ coming – a ‘cruel day of wrath and fierce anger’ on which the stars of heaven, moon and sun will give no light. The vision of Jesus, that the Son of Man would come on clouds with great power, is lifted from the Book of Daniel. The point of all this spirited and dreadful language is that, in life, sometimes, the sun in our sky does go dark, the moon does not shine, and the stars fall from our heaven.

By the end of the First World War, Spanish Flu was taking hold. After the carnage of the war, it is estimated that the flu infected a third of the world’s population, about 500 million people. It lasted for two years and two months and it killed as many as 50 million people. Just two decades later, in the Second World War, between 70 and 85 million people died, either directly by military action or in war-related famine. The apocalyptic language seems tragically appropriate.

In the world today, there is conflict and unrest in Ethiopia. Tens of thousands of civilians, women, children and men, are fleeing their homes in search of sanctuary and safety in neighbouring Sudan.

Recently, the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, said that 4000 people were crossing into Sudan every day. Last week, Pope Francis was criticised by the Chinese government for his support of a million Uighurs and other Muslim minority groups who are being detained in prison-like facilities in China; centres set up to separate Muslims from their religious and cultural heritage in which they are forced to declare loyalty to China's ruling Communist Party and its leader. Pope Francis spoke of the persecuted; their suffering, illness and solitude.

In Britain and across the world, we continue to face the challenge and dangers of COVID 19: the threat of the virus itself, but also that of economic stress and the decline in mental health. To date, there have been 59 million infections worldwide and 1.4 million deaths. In Britain, the death total is around 55,000. Living under government restrictions through the cold, dark nights of Winter is perhaps more challenging than doing so during the warmer, brighter days of Spring and Summer.

Of course, darkness in our own lives need not be part of worldwide events. Our lives can be most marked by the deaths of friends or loved ones. People can be miserable because they are trapped in a job that they loathe. We can be overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness when news headlines are dominated by stories of droughts, famines, devastating storms or, perhaps, the extinction of another animal. We do not have to look far for events of upheaval, for the turmoil of apocalyptic experiences.

In the face of gargantuan upheaval, personal or global, Jesus told His disciples to 'keep awake'. Some translations say, 'Watch!' Others, 'Watch and pray!' Whether it is 'watch' or 'awake', Jesus spoke of being alert, spiritually alert. For me, the word 'awake' suggests waking from sleep and being fully conscious. In Old English, 'awake' meant 'revive' or 'arise'. 'Arise': the word is suggestive of resurrection, new life, and new birth. On the Mount of Olives, amidst the turmoil and upheaval to come, Jesus encouraged His disciples to 'Keep awake! Arise! Watch and pray! Be spiritually alert and conscious.'

These are not trite words, lightly offered. Living under the brutality of Roman occupation, Jesus and His followers knew what oppression and blood-filled violence looked like. In my personal reading for the Season of Advent, I have turned again to the spiritual writer, Evelyn Underhill. In a short passage entitled, 'Shut the Door', Underhill reminds us that, in talking of prayer, Jesus said, 'When you pray, enter your room and shut the door'. Shut the door, she said, means that, even for a passing moment, we are encouraged to be alone, alone with God in our thoughts; still, and at peace in the Presence with no distractions. All of us are inclined to leave the door ajar, just a little, with noises from the world sneaking in: we take in the daily paper, literature of the charities we support, our diary or, in modern times, our laptop or phone. No, Underhill says, 'Shut the door!'. For a moment, don't pray for others or the world. She says, 'The voice of God is very gentle; we cannot hear it if we let other voices compete'.

We are to relax into moments of stillness. Every day in small ways nurture your sense of the sacred: God in the greenness of grass, in the wetness of rain, in the blueness of the sky, in the freshness of the cold

breeze, in the bulbs sleeping beneath the earth's surface waiting to arise, awake, in Spring, and in the smiling eyes of friends, neighbours and family. Part of faith, surely, is waiting; patiently waiting, conscious that Christ is at our side, within us, between us and all around. The gates of heaven are everywhere.

Jesus was with His disciples. In the midst of their turmoil, Jesus was with His disciples. In the midst of our trials, through friends, the comfort of public worship and our intimate moments of stillness, Jesus is with us. Each day, we are to awaken to His presence.

Amen.