

13.11.16
Remembrance Sunday – The Things That Make For Our Peace
2 Thessalonians 3. 6-13; Luke 21. 5-19

Introduction: Apocalypse Now

In this church we have to take health and safety considerations seriously. So before the service I conducted a risk assessment on the sermon. I have to report that there is a real and present danger that I may at some point lapse into what might seem ... a bit of a rant. If I do, lights will appear to illuminate the exits ... I'll really try not to. If you think by the end I fail to resist that, try to be consoled by the fact that I deleted most of what I *really* wanted to say.

Warning over. Bringing us to ... another warning: the Gospel reading.

Hmmm. On Wednesday I bought a beer I've not tried before, called "*Apocalypse Now*." I haven't drunk it yet, but it just seemed appropriate ... on Wednesday, and given this gospel reading, which I knew I'd need to say something about today.

Not the most cheerful passage: doom and destruction laden.

Jesus had entered Jerusalem and it was nearly Passover, the greatest festival of the year. People were admiring the temple, then almost complete. It was actually about 50 years into an 83-year rebuild; we've just had some builders overrun by 4 months on work for us; perhaps we got off lightly. The temple project was begun in 20 BC, not to be finished until AD 63, about 30 years after this incident.

It was stunning; the pride and joy of Jerusalem. So long a ruin, now glorious, the focal point of their religion, race, nation, community. But Jesus tactfully says, "Well, the day is coming when not one of these stones will be left on another – it's going to be flattened."

Well, thanks Jesus, that'll really help the Passover party spirit along.

Who wants a prophet of doom around when it's party time? Who *ever* wants one, come to that.

1. Not one stone will be left on another

Yeah, and thanks again, Jesus, for such a miserable Remembrance Sunday reading. But maybe it's apt. Why?

Well, Jesus warned his people about a coming calamity. They didn't believe him: *This temple? Destroyed? In our time? I don't think so!*

But seven years after the builders were done, it was destroyed. In response to the latest Jewish insurrection, the Romans besieged and sacked Jerusalem, butchering its people, and levelling the temple, in AD 70. An utter disaster: the Aleppo of its time, and worse.

Jesus had called his people to live peacefully, in spite of their oppression, maybe partly because of a sober calculation that they had no hope of victory against Rome's overwhelming power. He warned that rejecting his way of peace would be disastrous, repeatedly.

So, at his triumphal entry a few days before, he'd wept over Jerusalem and said, "If only you had known the things that make for your peace", but that they did not, and instead the city would be besieged and destroyed. That's in Luke 19.

He says it again here, Luke 21.

He'll repeat the warning a few days later as he carries his own cross, in Luke 23: seeing women crying for him in his pain, he said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me – weep for yourselves and your children," because of the calamity coming to them.

He seems to have thought this was an avoidable disaster, and appealed to the people to take a different path, though knowing they wouldn't.

So this is maybe an apt reading on Remembrance Sunday, when we recall war and its effects, and pray for peace. What might we hear in this today?

2. Is Our Peace Threatened?

Well, you could say, not that much. We've come to remember with gratitude those who served bravely to bring us through dark days; we're thankful, but their job was done well and we live in peace, so we don't need another prophet of doom today, thank you.

Or you could say, well, actually that liberty our parents and grandparents fought for is never guaranteed. It has to be tended, guarded. We don't want our temples, or village halls, town halls, our homes left with no two stones resting on another, of course. We spend our lives *building* our lives, growing, learning, working, earning, to do that. Also building relationships, families, communities, churches, society – building and maintaining all that is required, physical and social, to create a world good to live in, don't we? And we think and pray about how to build and maintain that life – all the things that make for our peace – when we gather to worship here, Sunday by Sunday.

So, to rightly receive the legacy of those who fought to safeguard civilisation means being vigilant now, working for society's peace and well-being now.

And as I listen to Jesus speaking about the choice of a path towards or away from an avoidable disaster in his day, in mine I feel anxious.

Is our peace threatened?

I think: yes. I don't have the divine insight Jesus did, and I'll be overjoyed to be wrong here, but I'm trying think Christianly about current events, and find myself worrying about how the legacy of peace others won for us is being handled.

3. Something is happening ...

Why? Am I going to talk to you about terrorism now? No, not really. Obviously, terrorism threatens our peace, and it's serious, but apart from that and partly in response to it, I fear something is happening in our western world – here, Europe, and the DSA, the Divided States of America – that's troubling.

It seems to me that something is happening to **civility**. The way in which people at the highest political levels have been willing to behave recently, with simple rudeness and abuse, shocks me. Oh - do *manners really* matter? Yes, and it's more than manners. It's respect, and a recognition that the world is complicated and people might take different sides in debates and yet not just be stupid, wrong or bad. When those who represent us fling accusation and insult around readily, as we've increasingly seen, it normalises disrespect, aggression, and threat. When civility is vandalised, we are all diminished. This doesn't build up; it tears down. It does not make for our peace. The words "civility" and "civilisation" are not accidentally similar.

And something is happening in the way we're handling **difference**. I'm not arguing for more or less immigration here; I'm asking what is OK or not in how we speak about races, religions, and minorities.

One thing we remember today is that in 1939-1945 people fought fascism, with its racist creed and actions. One of the countries annexed by Hitler's Third Reich was, of course, Austria. On December 4th Austria may well elect a president from their far-right nationalist party, which uses extreme language about minorities, and many argue incites violence against them. And parties and people with extreme nationalist views – by any usual reckoning of this – are thriving across the world, including France, Belgium, much of the very continent which was ripped apart by fascism, which we were proud to fight. In Austria, a country that shook off Nazi rule, and gave us *The Sound of Music* to celebrate this forever, far-right sentiment is being normalised.

Is that OK? Or are we losing something of what people fought and died for, which we remember with gratitude today?

Now, I realise these parties are often connecting with the anger of millions of people in many places about a loss of work, feeling marginalised, unheard, ignored by the establishment. Those feelings of abandonment are real, and responding to them is vital.

But suggesting that the causes and solutions of these problems are simple, or especially that any minority group is to blame for them, worries me, and I don't believe it either. Unemployment – for example – is being driven increasingly by technology: in 15 years' time it won't be a Somali refugee who takes over a Durham taxi driver's job; it'll probably be what? A driverless cab – it's already being trialled in Japan, Singapore and the USA. Multiply the coming unemployment of taxi drivers up across many other areas where robots will soon be cheaper than humans, and there's a *real* economic challenge coming hard at us. Politicians are strangely silent about this; maybe there's no one to easily blame. Maybe they don't want to take on powerful companies like Google, who have the contract for New York's future driverless cabs.

The robot rector who replaces me won't be mentioning this issue much either!

Our economic woes have many sources, and are really complicated – so any solutions surely will be too. But it's getting very hard to talk about this sensibly, examining the evidence. It seems to me that one of the things that makes for our peace, and builds our society, and its temples, services, and institutions, is that some people devote their lives to studying, researching, experimenting, and developing expertise in medicine, agriculture, the causes of migration, climate science, education. However, it seems now increasingly OK to for a politician to sweep all that irritating complexity to one side, and just declare simple solutions. Why? Because apparently we've had enough of experts. That is being said directly and indirectly on both sides of the Atlantic.

Really? *Really*? Shall we all re-wire our own houses, then ...

This mood of disdain for knowledge and experience matters, because, for example: you'll be hard pushed to find a single sensible climate scientist who questions whether human-driven climate change is real, and a massive threat to the peace of every single one of us; the world has painstakingly, eventually, reached the Paris Agreement to curb CO2 emissions.

But the President elect of the most powerful country in the world thinks it's OK to instead declare that climate change is a lie invented by the Chinese to hurt the American economy. If a GCSE student wrote this, they'd fail their geography assignment; but a Presidential candidate says it, and gets elected. To put this as civilly as I can muster (and this is really costing me), if he actually believes that he's ... uninformed; if he said it cynically to gain votes, he's unscrupulous. Either way, it is nonsense – total nonsense, unless the enterprise of science itself as a whole is nonsense instead.

Now didn't people fight for a world where we would try to tell the truth, and base the policies which affect millions of people on that? Didn't we fight against a regime that peddled myths and lies to manipulate people?

I want as *many* experts working on and being heard about the enormous challenges that that really threaten our peace – climate, migration, technology, employment, terrorism – as possible. In the dismissal of them, I worry whether something is happening to **sanity and wisdom** here.

To be really serious about this: Nazism was founded on a hate-driven mythology that sent six million people from certain minorities and religions, Jews and others, to the gas chambers, and killed more in a dreadful war. In many places not one stone was left on another. Nazism tapped into people's sense of injustice, blaming minorities for their problems, but it was nonsense, nonsense which was allowed to become official, and then shape policy. We remember with pride those who fought such evil today. But anti-Semitism is now increasing again across Europe and in the US.

And I wonder whether today, compared to, say, ten years ago, people are more or less likely to believe myths, simplistic solutions to complicated problems, often with a handy minority being held to blame? I fear, more likely.

People fought and died against Nazism for what ... democracy?

Yes, but democracy is a very tender plant, never safe, without care and attention; for its health, it needs the light of truth and the water of love. Democracy doesn't preserve itself.

There is a horrible thing called Robles disease, or River Blindness, caused by an African parasite. You catch it by being bitten by an infected fly. The parasite's larvae enter your body, and grow into worms inside you, which then burrow outwards through your skin, or eyeball, causing blindness. There's no vaccine. The best prevention is not being bitten by infected flies.

Democracy too can be eroded from the inside: River Blindness of the body politic. Hitler was democratically elected, and then he set to work.

4. Do not be idle

Now, as I say, I'll be delighted to be totally wrong that some signs of our times have echoes in the history we remember today. But some recent events feel extreme.

So I wonder, as Jesus called his people to the way of peace and wept that they refused, what would he say to us now, about how we nurture peace in our time, and defend the society we have built? That everything's fine, or that we have some work to do?

He called his people then to faithfulness, even if things got really horrible, as his followers would be persecuted within the woes coming on the country. However, he said that if they remained faithful, "By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Is there a struggle for the soul of the west wonder: is happening now?

Now, I don't really want to think about things like that. And as long as things aren't *so* bad here, isn't it OK?

I *feel* like that, but fear that might be just lazy, when it might instead be a time to think harder and work for a society that is civil, gracious, generous, sane, wise, and wary. That may be quite tiring. But our epistle concluded: "Brothers and sisters do not be weary in doing what is right."

Conclusion – By your endurance you will gain your souls

I apologise for sounding like a prophet of doom on Remembrance Sunday.

And for any ranting, if I did.

But one thing we discipline ourselves to remember today is that dark times really *can* come. People rarely believe *their* city, temple and institutions will be eroded, but darkness falls so slowly at the end of a day, you easily don't notice it happening.

But we also gathered to remember that in previous dark days people fought for a freedom which needs preserving carefully, gently, lovingly, reasonably, faithfully. The baton passes to us all. To work at the things that make for our peace, and identify and oppose those that threaten it. And we can choose to do that.

Then, "By your endurance you will gain your souls."

So I've decided *not* to drink my *Apocalypse Now* beer just yet.