

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 18th November 2018. Daniel 12.1-3
Hebrew 10:11-14, Mark 13:1-8*

Faith in God's Kingdom

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Every year the church goes through the same cycle of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Passiontide, Easter, Trinity to All Saints, All Saints to Advent, and begins again with Advent. Through this cycle, the story of why we are being saved, how we are being saved, and to what we are being saved, is told, re-told, and explored, week by week.

As we hear, and re-hear it, year on year, it begins to get inside us and, we grasp the whole, more fully, and that takes us deeper and helps us engage with it all, more meaningfully.

We get a sense, even if we would be hard pushed to articulate it, of what it means to be a follower of Christ, saved by Christ, and promised eternal life.

From year to year, our life circumstances change, so each year we receive the story as slightly different people to whom we were last year, with different experiences, and, as we reflect again on what it all means this time; so our understanding broadens.

Well, that's the theory of it!

In practise, the readings at this time of the year can sound obscure at best as we focus on the end times, with visions and prophecies – Daniel, Revelation and apocalyptic stuff.

We have been remembering saints, and souls, and those who gave lives in wars. Now we think of our own mortality, and readiness to move with them towards the coming of Christ's kingdom.

One name for this time between All Saints and Advent is 'Kingdom Season', ending with the feast of Christ the King next week.

I think its a most challenging time because it takes us into the space between death and resurrection, peering into the unknown – from our perspective – and wondering what we need to do to be ready. Where do we need to put our energies and our faith to start to prepare?

The reading from Daniel illustrates an expectation of resurrection – I'm told its the only place in the Old Testament that is explicit about resurrection – here, perhaps for a further judgment since it is the wicked as well as the righteous.

The focus though is on the righteous and the wise who will shine bright, and everyone who is written in the book will be delivered. This was written probably 165 years before the birth of Christ.

The coming of Christ produced a whole new understanding of who God is, and how he is saving us through Christ.

No longer is there a mysterious book: it is Christ himself who judges us.

And Christ himself who forgives and cleanses us.

The reading from Hebrews reminds us to have confidence in the work of Christ, that he can and does wash us clean from our sins through giving us his life.

When we receive the sacraments, the bread and the wine, he told us we would be receiving his body and his blood – his on-going life. T

his is what the bread and the wine become for us: a perpetual remembering of him; his body, his blood, and building ourselves up as the body of Christ, until he comes again.

Until he comes fully into his kingdom.

This is what he instructed us to do, in the action of the Eucharist. Through the mystery of faith, it does grow us and purify us as he becomes literally part of us.

Have confidence, says Hebrews, in the actions of Christ, that earn him the title of great priest over the house of God.

There are echoes of this in today's passage from Mark when Jesus and his disciples discuss the great, impressive temple. Jesus predicts that the temple will be destroyed – which it was, in the year 70. The massive feat of impressive engineering, the seat of power and holiness pulled down.

But who is really the indestructible seat of holiness and power?

That Jesus claimed he would raise the temple up again in three days, is recorded in John, and in the trial scene in Mark as false testimony against Jesus. Jesus' own resurrection, three days after his death on the cross, supplied us with the true and indestructible temple.

[By the way, there is a lot in Hebrews about blood and sacrifice because the author was keen to reassure his readers on this matter: that Christ had done away with the need for animal blood sacrifices and all the temple ritual - which was ineffectual anyway – by making himself a sacrifice on the cross: the ultimate high priest and ultimate temple combined.]

Jesus predicts that the magnificent, colossal, important central building of their faith is going to be pulled down – and his disciples want to know more – of course they do!

Jesus answers them, sitting on the Mount opposite the temple. I wonder if its significant that he places himself on a height, equal and opposite?

He has criticised the temple leaders for abusing their positions for power, he has observed them taking large sums of money to maintain it, for trading in it and making it a den of thieves. He says none of this directly but instead of giving his disciples the sort of information they want, he cautions them about the risk of being led astray, of mis-leaders. And he cautions them of the need to be patient and persistent through violence and conflicts, to remain true to him.

If Jesus was speaking to us in our world today, it would probably sound much the same: beware of false powers and promises, of fear, and violent coercion: remain true to him! How hard and confusing and hopeless that sounds when we consider the places where people are under extreme persecutions.

Indeed.

We need to add our prayers to theirs in calling upon God to do the impossible – since nothing is impossible for God – and resolve those situations.

To bring his kingdom close to them. And along with prayers, the small things we can do to help build that kingdom.

These shoeboxes will be distributed according to the kingdom values of unconditional love, regardless of race, gender or religion. They will speak personally to each child of being loved by someone they will never know, they will bring joy, and

respite for a moment from poverty, and dignity in place of shame.

We cannot know how it will all work out for the recipients of these shoeboxes, we have to trust in both institutions, and God, working through us and them.

Jesus's kingdom of mercy, and justice, of wholeness and healing, of freedom from the oppression of poverty and the misuse of power – his kingdom values sit opposite to so much in our world today.

Where do we place our trust?

What would Jesus be saying if he were sitting on the mount with us looking at our government, our work places, our church, ourselves?

How can we hold on to a vision of his kingdom values overtaking and overturning the things that stand in opposition?

We rashly pray, 'Thy kingdom come', looking ahead to when Christ comes into the fullness of his kingdom and all creation is renewed. Starting with the now: starting with the signs of his kingdom coming around us now, and longing for its culmination in everything Christ has promised.

But real life, the lives that we lead, seem so complicated, so multi-faceted when we try to see the good and the bad threads that run through everything, including ourselves.

How do we conduct ourselves in the confusions of life, and lures of false values?

Hebrews urges us to hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.

To know that God is faithful.

To keep faith in Christ and encourage one other.

That encouragement that we give each other as we meet here, as we share the Eucharist, as we go out alongside each other to be living sacrifices – that is, Christ-people – is so important as a foundation for building the kingdom.

That wonderful phrase ‘provoke one another to love and good deeds’. We know it when we meet it, we know the influence for provoking love and good that we can have on each other.

As we go about the muddle of our lives, simply keep returning to faith in Christ, in his saving of us, and pray ‘Thy kingdom come’. It will. He promised.

Amen