St Ninian’s Uniting Church 2 December 2018

**Alert but not alarmed!** (Luke 21.25-36)

*Advent 1*

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Today the Christian liturgical calendar begins again – happy new year! It’s cycle C in the three-year lectionary and Luke’s gospel will be a key text throughout the year.

Now, you’ve just heard the reading set for today and you’ll notice it wasn’t as chipper as we might expect for a first reading of the year. What we get in fact is a rather sombre warning: *‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars’,* Jesus says*, ‘and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken’* (25-6). Hardly your typical new year’s greeting; there’s no cork popping or neighbour hugging in this text. It’s more like what you’d expect from an earnest street-preacher warning happy revellers that the end is nigh, and that they need to repent – now!! So, what are we to make of these words? Why are texts like this set for Advent, and how are we to hear them?

According to Jesus (in the passage itself), these things are shared to engender hope. *‘Now when these things begin to take place’,* he says, ‘*stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near’* (28). And again in verse 31, *‘when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near’*. That sounds positive, but in the context of *everything else* it’s not totally reassuring. No wonder we find these passages disconcerting. Yes, there’s talk of redemption, but in this picture, things seem to get a lot worse before they get better!

Well, a couple of comments that may help. A word about content and style. The passage we’re reading includes what is commonly called ‘apocalyptic’ language – a literary genre common in texts written during this period. Other examples of apocalyptic language in scripture include the book of Revelation and parts of the latter prophets. You may have struggled with those too.

The word apocalyptic comes from Greek *apokaluptikos* meaning ‘to uncover’ or ‘reveal’. These texts are intended to disclose the meaning of historical events, but they do it subversively, symbolically, representationally by using colourful cosmic and other-worldly imagery. The language in these texts is dramatic and, to our sensibility, often quite bizarre. That’s to stress the import of the events. It can seem strange and out of date to us (unless you’re a reader of science fiction or fantasy) but, in fact, we still communicate this way, even in every day speech. Someone might describe their diagnosis or the death of a loved one as ‘earth-shattering’, for example, or as ‘the end of the world’. It isn’t literal (everyone knows that) – what’s conveyed is impact and significance. When a loved one dies that’s what it feels like – the end of the world.

It’s like that here in Luke. Jesus is using typical Jewish apocalyptic imagery to refer to ‘events within the present order that are felt and perceived as “cosmic” or [as we might say] “earth-shattering”.’ (Wright 1996:362). When he talks about ‘signs in the sun, the moon and the stars’, and of cosmic upheaval – ‘the roaring of the sea and waves’ and the shaking of the heavens (25-6), he’s referring (as many OT prophetic passages do) to the experience of socio-political and military catastrophe, specifically to the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple (which have already been mentioned in the chapter). When he invokes an image from Daniel 7, *‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’* – ‘coming’ or ‘going’, the Greek can mean either – he’s not predicting the Parousia, that some majestic, super-human figure is going to appear in the sky and wrap up history. No, he’s talking about the vindication of something significant *within* history, the vindication of his message, purpose and people. According to biblical scholar NT Wright, the phrase ‘coming of the son of man’ is ‘good first-century metaphorical language for two things: the defeat of the enemies of the true people of God, and the vindication of the true people themselves’ (1996:362). In other words, with this cosmic imagery Jesus is infusing worldly events with spiritual significance.

For the first disciples and the early church, the experience of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple was radically destabilising. Jesus’s words here were spoken to warn them that these things would happen, but also to reassure them. Yes, at one level such happenings signify an end – the collapse of certain structures, assumptions and institutions; but it’s not THE END, for as he keeps saying, amidst the chaos and destruction there is advent – something new coming to pass. *‘When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near’* (28).

In the next paragraph, he has another go, this time drawing on a natural image – the leafing of trees. When you see the leaves unfurling you know that summer is on the way, he says. *‘So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near’* (32).

In terms of meaning then, it seems that in this text we’re being told of two dynamics, two qualities of existence simultaneously present. There’s *this* world, the world of empire and commerce convulsed by rivalry, threat and struggle, and there’s *the divine reality* growing quietly but insistently in the midst of it. Jesus is clear on this, and yet discerning this deeper reality in the midst of everyday life is not easy. In fact, it’s all too easy to *misread* the import of things, to be distracted and overwhelmed by the struggles and temptations of this world and so miss what God is doing. Which is why Jesus calls for vigilance. *‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life’* (34). And again, *‘Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things* *that will take place’* (36).

The importance of ‘seeing’, of noticing and responding to the subtle signs of the kingdom is stressed again and again in this gospel. Disciples are called to alertness – to prayer and attention, perseverance and discernment lest they be caught out, caught up, ‘trapped’ in futility.

For us, of course, the particular events of which Jesus speaks have passed. But there are always new threats, new upheavals. In our time, natural and social systems are breaking down. We’re facing the ever more urgent threat of climate change, the mass movement of displaced peoples, and political instability as ascending and declining global powers jostle for position. Our text remains as relevant as ever.

And so, here we are on the first Sunday in Advent reading it afresh, being greeted not with ‘happy new year’ but with a call to watch and pray; to seek to discern the deeper meaning of things amidst the busyness and complexity, the confusion and distress of our times and indeed, our own lives. We’re to be alert, but not alarmed – to look for where and how God is with us and working in the midst of things, so that our hearts may not be weighed down, so that we might rise up, so that we might abound in hope.

**References**

Wright, NT (1996) *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.