

November 17 2012

Pentecost 26

Isaiah 65: 17-25; 2Thessalonians 3: 6-13; Luke 21: 5-19

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There is resurrection, redemption and rescue in the end.

Who of you here today remembers the ‘build-up’ to the turn of the century? Seems ages ago now, doesn’t it, but by the second half of 1999, there were predictions that the world as we knew it was going to end, there were prophecies of total destruction, earthquakes, the computer world would lead us into nuclear meltdown; because of the Y2K virus all our bank accounts would be frozen or emptied, apocalyptic literature seemed take on a life of their own, movies, self-help books, talk shows, thrived on apocalyptic talk. It seems mildly amusing now, some 13 years later, but at the time it was a big deal it was serious, and many people thought it would all become a reality. These predictions were no different than the ones we have heard in today’s readings.

But, at the risk of sounding like a well known ogre speaking to an equally well known donkey, it is like an onion, it has lots of layers. Today’s readings are full of layers. It just depends on how deep you are willing to venture to find what they are saying to you.

Our reading from Isaiah speaks to a people who had been exiled, who had lost their home, and who had returned to find the place in ruins. Everything they knew was either gone, or a pile of rubble. Isaiah is promising that things will get better, that life will return to how it was before, that new buildings, new crops, new businesses will emerge. Think back to 2011. The floods which devastated Ipswich and surrounding areas, everywhere you looked there were only scenes of devastation, but now there is rebuilding, people have returned to their homes, businesses are up and running again, bridges are being or have

been repaired, new river walks have been created. Yes, there are still people who have not been able to repair their houses yet, just as Isaiah found, two generations after the exile, rebuilding was still occurring, there was still hunger, thirst, illness, sorrow and grief. But Isaiah offers hope, he offers a vision that God is about to do a new and great thing ‘create new heavens and a new earth’.

Just as post exile Israel was looking at rubble, we too are looking at rubble. Both physically in what is still unfinished post flood, but more deeply rubble in our society. There are many in our society who hunger, thirst, who are in sorrow or grief. What is our response to them? What message can we give to them? Can we speak as Isaiah does? Can we bring a message that God is about to create new heavens and new earth today, here in Ipswich, in Brisbane, in Queensland, or more broadly in Australia? This is God’s will, and we are invited to join in it. God speaks loudly in the middle of disaster, in the middle of despair. Life is hard, and sometimes our faith strains to maintain us in our private or personal struggles. God’s act of creating heaven and earth is not simply a fact of the far-distant past; it is ongoing and even quite progressive. God is still creating a world that will be as God has always intended it – free from sin and death. As we read these words from Isaiah, we trust that at the core of Israel’s story as well as our own, God is at work for the good of all of God’s children no matter how things may appear at the moment.

Our second reading reveals a people, the Thessalonians, who have decided that the Messiah is returning immanently so they are just sitting back and waiting for it. Paul is telling them, don’t get in front of God; don’t presume you know what is about to happen before it has happened. In short, don’t just sit there waiting, Jesus will return when God is good and ready for him to do so, and in the meantime, get back to work, and do what is right.

In our Gospel, Jesus is telling them of the future destruction of the temple. For the Jews in Jesus time, the Temple was very important, yet it brought with it mixed emotions. The Temple evidenced God’s glory, yet it also was evidence of Herod’s excesses. The Temple was

where the Jews offered worship and sacrifice to God, a place which showed the glory of God, yet Herod had made it a place which reflected **his** glory, Herod had spent inordinate sums of money to beautify the temple so as to bring glory to **him**. So the idea that the temple would be levelled would have been met with mixed feelings. It would have meant that the visible signs of the corruption of Herod would be removed from the holy city, but, the Temple was the Temple, and not even Herod's corruption could remove that.

Remember also, when Luke wrote his Gospel, the temple had been in ruins for some 30 years. So this foreshadowed destruction has already been seen. This is often the case with proclamations of warning, what is foreshadowed has already been seen before. No prediction is new, all has happened before, and will probably happen again. In any group of people there will be some who can tell you about the previous time. But in that group there will also be some who, having witnessed and lived through the previous times, will share stories of resilience, of how they found resurrection in the midst of the destruction, share stories of triumph and life after the fact. In the words of Jesus we hear not only a promise of destruction, but a promise of life after the destruction, of not only survival, but new life in the future. Jesus says, God's faithful people should lift their heads and expect resurrection, redemption and rescue.

Many have been tempted to interpret or read today's gospel as literally predicting wars and earthquakes, and then when these things occur in their lifetime, they are brought out as evidence that the 'last days' are approaching. But those who wrote the Gospels, and other 'apocalyptic' scriptures were not intending to foreshadow events which would occur 'centuries' in the future, no, they were interpreting their present day crises as being the last crisis to befall human history, to be followed very soon by its consummation. There is no doubt Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple, this was one of the charges against him at his trial, but, given the gospel was written some 30-40 years later, and the temple had already been destroyed, these words of Jesus have been given new meaning by the gospel

writers, they have been accentuated to give an emphasis which related to the Judean crises of the time. The predictions of wars, famines, earthquakes, may reflect more accurately the situation found toward the end of the first century than the time of Jesus. The foreshadowing of persecutions are real warnings from Jesus to his disciples but are given more emphasis in the light of what befell Peter, James, Paul and others in the years after Jesus. The promise to the disciples of divine assistance in the time of trial reflects Jesus' real promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There is also an interesting parallel between the words Jesus speaks in our Gospel and his life. If we look at Jesus life, from infancy to his death, we see he lived, when he was yet a baby, through a war waged by Herod against children, his childhood saw his country conquered by the Romans, in adulthood he was betrayed by his friend, and then persecuted and killed by society's rulers. Our gospel speaks of wars, insurrections, betrayals, arrests, persecutions, and death. What Jesus is foreshadowing for the future has been lived by him in his present.

So what do we do with today's gospel? I mean, when has there not been turmoil in the world, when has there not been wars, or at least strong animosity between nations. When has there not been earthquakes, cyclones, suffering. So if they have always been there, and if they will always be there, what is the point of what we have heard? The point is what Jesus says after the predictions. 'do not be perturbed, these things are bound to happen.' Bound to happen. Jesus is not talking about - the end of everything, but that - everything is ending. Every day is an end, every day is the last. Every time a life begins, it is the beginning of the end. Whether a life lasts eight minutes, or eight years, or eighty-eight years, that person faces the end of the world. The world, with all the possibilities and opportunities passes away every night. Every time we see a sunset, we see the end of a day which will never return. Each death closes the curtain on a never to be repeated drama. Every generation, in one way or another, is the last. And the signs of the end times are seen in each generation, each day, each death. And with every death, there is

resurrection, redemption and rescue. Everything Jesus is predicting has taken place, is taking place and will always take place. Life is a mystery, and the groaning of creation finds its meaning in hope. Jesus counsels us not to be alarmed or concerned about what is happening. Do not follow the false prophets who are found around every corner. We will be given all the words and wisdom we need. No matter what difficulty surrounds us, our generation, our species, it is not death but a new saving birth which is assured. ‘not a hair on our head will be harmed’, in patient endurance, life will be saved.