

Pentecost 26- St Aidan's & Wesley 10.30am- 13th November 2016

Reading: Luke 21:5-19 'Signs of the end of the age'

Text: "By standing firm you will gain life" Luke 21:19

Introduction

There are several things we need to note as we come to reflect on this passage for today. Firstly, Jesus has just had a discussion with the Sadducees about resurrection and eternal life. He has soundly defeated their arguments that there is no resurrection. This was part of last Sunday's Gospel from Luke 20:27-40. Secondly, Jesus and his disciples are in the outer areas of the temple in Jerusalem and it is here that the discussions take place. Thirdly, Jesus knows that he is near the end of his earthly life and he is preparing the disciples for the troubles that are to come for those who believe in him. Finally, we know that the Gospel of Luke was written after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, around 80-90AD, and this passage highlights the prophetic nature of Jesus' ministry where he foresees the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem which occurred in 70AD.

With these factors in our mind, this passage makes more sense but is still quite difficult and we can't answer all aspects of what Jesus meant. However, we can make some educated guesses, using history as a guide. So let us delve a little deeper.

Middle

This has been a strange week. We have had the huge publicity about the Presidential election in the United States – Clinton versus Trump and now see the outcome. President – elect Trump will be an interesting challenge to the world to work with if he follows up some of his rhetoric! We also have had Armistice Day or Remembrance Day here, that marked the end of the so called 'war to end all wars' which was definitely not the case. We continue to see the atrocities of the war in Syria and the move in Iraq to take back Mosul off the IS fighters. I was amazed to see the resumption of Christian worship in some of the 'liberated villages' on the outskirts of Mosul. My amazement was that the Christian faith had been maintained even through the past few years of fundamentalist Islam and most things Christian being destroyed (and Christians executed). We have also seen a variety of natural disasters around the world, not the least being the fires around Australia.

I then read both the Gospel for the day from Luke 21 and the passage from Isaiah 65 which talks about a new world order where the 'wolf and the lamb will feed together and the lion will eat straw like the ox'. Looking at our world today I wondered to myself 'How will this happen – can it really be something that God can do?' It is so easy to become depressed as we read the papers and listen to the news, as we struggle with our faith and wonder about the future. What will it be like into the twenty second century? Then I came back to the Gospel and Jesus' words to his disciples so long ago. There they are standing in the midst of this amazing Temple precinct, a monument to Herod the Great, begun in 19BC. Herod more than doubled the size of the temple and people could gather in large colonnades or porches around the main Temple. Here they could talk, change money, buy sacrificial doves and sheep, meet in separate areas, men from the women. Work continued on the temple re-build until around 62-64AD.

Less than a decade later everything was destroyed by the Romans to put down a Jewish rebellion and much of its art and furnishing were plundered and taken back to Rome and paraded there so Josephus, the ancient historian records. Jesus foresaw this destruction and tells his disciples about it.

He also foresaw the time of false leaders and false prophets that would lead people away from God rather than to be faithful to God in verses 7-8 of Luke 21.

Jesus then goes on to talk about world turbulence in verses 10-11. Here we see great correlation with the devastation occurring today. Nation against nation, earthquakes and famine and pestilence around the earth. We could envisage Jesus was speaking of our world, today.

Finally, in the longest section of today's reading in verses 12-19, Jesus speaks of arrests, persecution, hatred and endurance that precedes the other things.

Reading around this passage one writer had this to say about the wrong theology of sections of the western church. William Willimon writes:

“Are you feeling anxious? Are you fearful of tomorrow,
How you are going to make ends meet or
how will your kids turn out or what will your old age look like?
Come to Jesus, he'll fix all that!
Have you had a tough week? Things not good in your life
or at the office or problems at home or school?
Come to Jesus, he'll fix all that!
Are you ill, facing a health crisis or a personal crisis that causes you worry and
pain, wondering what the next step will be in your cure?
Come to Jesus, he'll fix all that!
Are you looking for greater stability in a rapidly changing world?
Do you need a place to rest, reassurance that things will stay the same for you
rather than slip away from you? Come to Jesus, he'll fix all that.”

While there are aspects of truth in these words, the western church has, in parts, forgotten the tough words of Jesus to his disciples and words for us today. Following him will not be easy. The world is a dangerous place made even more so in following Jesus. In Australia we mostly do not comprehend this but you don't have to go far to see fellow Christians being persecuted for their faith. Try Jakarta at the moment and the incumbent Christian mayor who had 200,000 people protesting against him this past week because he is a Christian and not a Muslim.

Jesus concludes the passage with the words: “By standing firm you will gain life.”

In a sense this passage is a rallying cry for Jesus' disciples and the early church to stand firm in their faith no matter what happens and Jesus knows a lot of things will happen to those who follow him.

What can we learn from the Gospel today

1. Jesus warns us that there are tough times ahead. As we follow Jesus we may lose some of our treasured security and stability and there may be pain. However we are called to stand firm in our faith whatever may happen and however hard we may find life.
2. Tough times, whether brought about by our attempts to follow Jesus or occurring simply because we are human and not divine, are times for us to speak up for Jesus, even in times of pain, stress or sadness. Again this is standing firm in our faith through all aspects of life.
3. Jesus doesn't lie about the human condition. Jesus doesn't promise us lives without pain and difficulty. In fact, today's Gospel implies that we can expect to be put in difficulty because we are trying to follow Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. However, Jesus does promise never to forsake us, never to leave us to our own devices and he will always keep walking along side of us. This is our assurance that there is nothing to fear whatever the future may hold. Amen.