

## A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

2 before Advent C

17<sup>th</sup> November 2019

Micah 4.1-2

Luke 21.5-19

### Apocalypse now

Sarah Thorne and I were discussing on Friday how difficult some passages of Scripture are to use with children, because people are so violent in them, or even because God comes across as so violent. When we tell a story in the School Service for the Infants on a Friday – a story such as that of the Israelites' flight from Egypt, or the fall of Jericho – we have to be very careful how we handle it.

I think our difficulties in presenting some parts of the Bible to children don't just stem from the desire to protect them from scary thoughts and the glorification of violence, but from the fact that there are some things in the Bible which we, as adults, recoil from ourselves. If we take the imagery of the first verses of Malachi 4, for example – imagery of God burning people up like stubble – it's hard to be immediately comfortable. Of course, we can reflect a bit more

deeply, and notice that Malachi is talking about the *attitude of heart* whereby people destroy themselves spiritually – if you've nurtured in yourself an attitude of arrogance, for example, as in Malachi 4.1, perhaps, as C.S. Lewis would say you've somehow, through your accumulation of choices, *made yourself* into the kind of person who can't accept God's redemption. We can also stand back and say that verses like these about the destruction of the wicked celebrate something which we *do* actually long for – the righting of all wrongs, the cleansing of the earth, the creation of something new and indestructibly good. But nevertheless, some discomfort which may account for the fact that that the makers of our lectionary chose not to continue today's passage from Malachi into the next verse: '*And you shall continue the passage we heard tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts*' (Mal. 4.3). We recoil from the violence and triumphalism these words imply, as well as being uncomfortably aware that it's pretty ambiguous, really, who is truly virtuous and who is truly wicked. Where are we in this picture, this prophecy?

We may feel similarly uncomfortable with the thought that Jesus gave teaching like the words of the Gospel this morning. It's St Luke's version of his teaching about the 'end times' – what we call 'apocalyptic' teaching. We know, of course, that millions of Christians have taken on board teaching such as this, and drawn courage from it, particularly in the midst of tumults, disasters and persecutions. We also know that apocalyptic imagery isn't unrealistic– it describes catastrophes and conflicts which are all too real in the course of human history, many of which we create for ourselves. We also know what it is to live with fear for greater catastrophes in the future – whether the fear I grew up with, of nuclear war between the superpowers, or now, the fear of environmental and climate disaster. But we may find it hard to think in terms of a loving God visiting these terrible things on people as a punishment, or as great signs that he's coming in judgement. We more naturally explain these things, or measure these fears, in terms of the unavoidable working out of natural laws in the universe, or the results of disastrous human choices. and actions – actions which afflict the innocent, very often before they afflict the responsible parties.

Yes- passages of apocalyptic in the Bible are difficult for us today in many ways, and I don't pretend to know the answer to the problem. I think there's little reason to doubt, however, that Jesus did prophesy terrible events to come in the future, even though the exact form of his prophecy differs in the 3 Gospels in which it occurs. These events happened when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 – and he had preached 40 years earlier that this would be the result of the wrong choices being made by the people and particularly their leaders in his day. He wept over what he saw coming. Whether what he said extended to a complete mapping out of much more distant events – 'the end of the world' – is perhaps more debatable. However, resonances have been felt in every age with words from today's Gospel Passage:

*'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.'* (Luke 21.9-11).

These words sound as though they describe contemporary events: they've *always* sounded that way. The difference for us today is our much greater knowledge of what happens on the farthest side of the world, our much greater involvement through the media and the internet, with even distant sufferings, risings and the tumults appearing on our screens in – as they say – ‘real time’. And contemporary sounding, too, is what follows in this passage: prophecy of arrests, persecutions and cruelty towards those who follow Christ's way, whether in testifying directly of their faith, or simply through standing up for truth and justice in a corrupt and cruel world.

By the time St Luke's Gospel was written the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple which Jesus prophesied had probably already occurred. It was a huge national and religious disaster. Many of the Jews were taken away into slavery - (did you know that it was in large part Jewish slave labour which built the Coliseum in Rome?) But even worse, the precious Temple was gone, and it's never been rebuilt, even to this day. Perhaps, too, Luke might have written after the whole Mediterranean world had been rocked by the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, when the darkened

sky, seething sea, blood red moon, and falling bolts of sulphurous material would have seemed a direct fulfilment of apocalyptic prophecy.

As the early church witnessed and lived through these events, its members would have seen them as signs of the times: things which were prophesied as the precursors of Jesus' return to earth. 'Surely', they would have reasoned, 'now these things have happened he must be coming back very soon indeed?' They would never have imagined that 2,000 or so years later we'd be here, still living through wars, insurrections, famines, and natural disasters – and yet the Lord has not returned in visible form. it

What might the early Christians have thought if they'd known the world would roll on for millennia more? Well, perhaps there's a partial clue in the actions of St Luke himself. He must have known of the fall of Jerusalem at the time he wrote; he, presumably, felt that it was one of the signs of the end-time and yet, undeterred, he embarked on his lengthy project of writing a Gospel. He did what was given him to do – bracketing-off the question of whether he'd be given the time ever to finish it.

For us, 2,000 years on, it has become almost impossible to see disasters and persecutions as signs that the arrival of Christ on earth is necessarily imminent. We, even more than the early Christians, can't claim to know that the sad story of human history will soon get resolved into the ultimate healing and restoration of God's kingdom; and yet, like them, we can *trust*, and do what's give us to do even though there's so much we don't understand.

But where's the Good News in all of this? Surely it consists in the awareness that where there's insecurity, so too God is near. We are to live each day with clear eyes for what's happening around us – clear eyes which show us how to live courageously, justly, and with a healing touch in the present times; and we can live in radical trust that he is near, whilst being immersed in this world God loves so much .

The scripture's recipe for living through times of insecurity is not to run away or take elaborate steps to protect ourselves from disaster; nor even that we should give thought to 'what should I do *if* such and such a thing happens?' One of the most striking sentences in our Gospel reading was the one which

began, '*So make up your minds....*': we might naturally expect the sentence to go on, '*...make up your minds what you're going to say, what you're going to do...*' – but, in fact, it says exactly the opposite: '*Make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.*' (Luke 21.14). So – no point lying in bed and worrying and preparing for times of trial! Don't do that, Jesus is saying here. Learn to be the kind of person who has a radical trust that the Holy Spirit is with you and will be sufficient for you when you come to the test; put yourself in the hands of God; learn not to be a worrier or someone who nurses all kinds of schemes born out anxiety and fear.

If that's hard for us, how much harder for the millions of Christ's followers who live not only with the challenges of poverty and disaster, but also with the very real experience that they are in danger simply because of their faith, or because they are truth-speakers in a more general sense! And yet their courage gives us inspiration and an example of what real trust means.

Our Gospel reading ended, '*not a hair of your head will perish – by your endurance you will gain your souls*' (Luke 21.18-19). Jesus evidently wasn't making a literal promise about his people having complete immunity from physical harm, but he *was* promising his abiding presence in and through whatever happens in the world - and that is enough for our spiritual life to continue.

As we pray for those who face much greater times of trial than we may ever do, let's also allow him to minister to us and our needs, by renewing us in the consciousness of his ever-faithful presence in this day, and this age, as he comes to lie in us once again in the sacrament and gift of Communion.