

Readings for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

17th November 2024

First Reading: Daniel 12:1-3

In the third year of King Cyrus a word was revealed to Daniel. 'At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.'

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:11-14,19-25

Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God,' and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.' For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Gospel: St John Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.'

A Reflection for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

In some denominations, including parts of the Anglican Communion, the period between the Feast of All Saints on 1st November and the beginning of Advent is kept as a time of celebration of the reign of Christ in earth and heaven, often referred to as the 'Kingdom season'. The Scottish Episcopal Church has not formally subscribed to this. Nevertheless, in sharing the Revised Common Lectionary with others, we have readings at this time of year which, as we have heard this morning, reflect the theme of God's Kingdom.

However, today's Gospel reading is perhaps more about what the Kingdom is not than what it is. As Jesus and his disciples leave the Temple, one of them says 'What large stones and what large buildings!' I'm sorry to say that this immediately reminds me of the story of Little Red Riding Hood: 'what large ears you have, Grandmama!', 'what large teeth you have, Grandmama!' Before you think I am being facetious, Little Red Riding Hood saw what was in front of her but did not immediately recognise its significance and had a narrow escape. Similarly, Jesus' disciples were awestruck by the magnificence of the Temple, but did not entirely recognise either its or Jesus' significance. A reminder that we are all on a learning curve.

At that time, the Temple in Jerusalem, usually referred to as the Second Temple, was the third building on the same site, a rebuild of the second one. The first Temple, Solomon's Temple was built in the 10th century BCE, and we can read much of its magnificence in the historical books of the Old Testament. It was destroyed by the Babylonians early in the 6th century BCE.

The building of the Second Temple began towards the end of the 6th century BCE when the people started to return from exile in Babylon, as described in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and elsewhere. That Temple was largely destroyed in 168 BCE, during the time of the Maccabees, by the Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes, who converted the site to a fortress. Following the arrival of the Romans, Herod the Great began the restoration of the Temple in 20 BCE. Whilst the main structure was completed in just a few years, further building was still going on 50 years later, at the time of Jesus' life and ministry.

Although descriptions of its size vary, it was clearly a vast structure that dominated the city, built of huge white stones, with porticos, colonnades and courtyards, and with elaborate decoration. Truly magnificent. But, whilst Jesus' disciples were impressed, Jesus, clearly, was not. The Temple, although a site of worship and pilgrimage, had, in many ways, come to represent earthly power and the corruption of the religious hierarchy that Jesus constantly challenged throughout his ministry.

Of course, it is not wrong to build large and beautiful buildings to the glory of God. We have many such Cathedrals in this country and across the world, and their beauty can inspire our faith. In the 19th century, the Oxford Movement was known for building beautiful churches in the poorest slums of our cities, and celebrating elaborate liturgies, to bring a glimpse of glory and beauty to otherwise drab and harsh lives. Think what you may of that approach, and I should add that they also did a huge amount to relieve the suffering of the poor, ultimately the grandeur is not what's important. As Jesus predicted for the Temple: 'Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

As you probably know, the Second Temple in Jerusalem was finally destroyed in 70 CE in the Jewish Roman war. This was possibly known when Mark's Gospel was written, and possibly not, but it would certainly have been

known to many of its early audience. That knowledge would have lent an extra urgency to what Jesus then went on to say.

Jesus inner circle of disciples came to ask Jesus more: 'Tell us, when will this be and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' It's an important question. Mark's audience were suffering under Roman oppression and, like all who suffer, would like to know when it would end. Don't we all think we crave certainty? And yet, if we had it, other difficulties would inevitably be created.

Jesus' response is imprecise – exact times are not what we should focus on. Instead, he warns of false Messiah's, of wars and rumours of wars, of earthquakes and famines, as just the beginning, but such things have been happening in every generation since the time of Jesus, and they continue to happen now. Jesus' words are a reminder that the material, earthly things we are tempted to put our trust in, things we take for granted as secure, are fragile and can be thrown down by life's circumstances. Earthly power structures will come to an end, just as the Temple did. God's Kingdom is not like earthy kingdoms, not about outward magnificence or buildings. As Jesus speaks to his disciples, he warns them: 'Beware that no-one leads you astray.'

This reading gives us an opportunity to consider what are the Temples in our own lives? What are the things that lead us astray; the things, the people, the institutions that we put our trust in without, like Little Red Riding Hood, looking beyond the immediate to see the real significance. It can be easy to enter into relationships of trust with genuinely good intentions but fail to notice as things change to become an end in themselves rather than leading us to God. Sadly, that can include the church.

Our brothers and sisters in the Church of England have had an extremely difficult week. Part of their problem, historically, seems to have been protecting the institution rather than addressing the issue of abuse and doing what was right. There is no excuse for that. But we should pray for them, not because they have been 'found out' but because they need to work through this, to seek justice for the survivors of abuse, as far as that is possible, to look beyond magnificence of the institution, now somewhat bruised and battered, and find anew the real significance of being followers of Jesus Christ. We should pray for the victims this and other abuses, whose trust in God has been violently shaken if not destroyed. And we should pray for ourselves because there, but for grace of God, we all go. There is never room for complacency. We all get things wrong at times, and how we respond, individually and collectively when we do make mistakes matters immensely.

This sad situation reminds us that God's Kingdom is about people and our inward attitudes, and of the need to remain alert. We live with the paradox that God's Kingdom is both now and not yet. Instead of being concerned about when God's Kingdom will finally be fulfilled, we are called to live lives of preparation, seeking to live according to God's values as best we can, holding each other to account in love when we fall short. The passage from Hebrews reminds us that Christ's self-offering has reconciled us to God, it encourages us to 'provoke one another to love and good deeds', and it even reminds us of the importance of meeting together! It is together that we are the Body of Christ.