Readings for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

16th November 2025

First Reading: Isaiah 65:17-25

Thus says the Lord: For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days or an old person who does not live out a lifetime, for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred years will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat, for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Second Reading: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

We command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Gospel: St Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And Jesus said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them. 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.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So 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. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.'

A Reflection for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

When I was on holiday in Yorkshire in May, one of the places we visited was Byland Abbey. Byland is a 12th century Cistercian Abbey like the nearby, better-known, Rievaulx Abbey, and was one of the largest Cistercian Abbeys in Britain. Its vast church, the size of many cathedrals, was one of the most elaborate built by the Cistercians, and its cloister was one of the largest in England. In addition, there was accommodation and service blocks for around 40 monks and 100 lay brothers. In its heyday, in the 14th and 15th centuries, it had a huge influence over large parts of north and west Yorkshire. The abbey was closed in 1538 as part of Henry VIII's suppression of the monasteries following his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. The buildings were gutted; initially stripped of their lead, glass and timber, as well as their valuables, the abbey gradually fell into ruin. Over the years, many of the great carved stones were removed for other building projects, locally and further afield, and the rest started to collapse through neglect, although what is left gives a good idea of just how impressive a place it must have been.

I was reminded of the story of Byland Abbey when I read today's Gospel. The monks, lay brothers and local people may well have felt that they were living in the end times that Jesus predicted. As they saw their beautiful church and abbey being destroyed, it would have been reminiscent of Jesus' words in this passage, when he said that the Temple with its beautiful stones and gifts would be destroyed. And they too found their own safety to be at risk for the faith they held to. It was a brutal and terrifying time.

But sadly history has plenty of examples of brutal and terrifying times. And looking around world today we can feel the same as we see wars, acts of terrorism, earthquakes, epidemics such as Covid, environmental damage and the climate crisis with the consequent increase in storms, fires and droughts, economic downturns … a seemingly endless catalogue of difficulties, all leading to famine, refugee crises in many places, and other hardships. For many in the world, their safety is at risk.

In reality, these things have always been a part of human history. No place or time has been immune from the effects of human failings and human arrogance. And history has also shown that we are never short of people prophesying that the end is nigh. But the truth is that we don't know if these are the end times, or when that end will come. As Matthew's Gospel (24:42) puts it: 'Keep awake, therefore, for <u>you do not know</u> on what day your Lord is coming'.

Next week, we will celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the church year when we think about Christ's return in glory. This week is more about the time between now and then. And it raises questions for us: Where is God in all this hardship? And how do we navigate these times?

Today's passage from Isaiah reminds us that all this was not God's plan for the world, and it is not his intention for the world in the future. Through the prophet, God promises a time when all of creation will live in peace, just as he

originally intended it to be. This part of the long book of Isaiah, and from close to its end, is thought to have been written when God's people were in exile in Babylon. It has parallels with the visions in Revelation of a new heaven and a new earth, and the holy city, a new Jerusalem. It speaks of God's abundant blessings that will be poured out on the earth. It is a vision of hope that God's original intentions and purposes for the world will be restored, a world at peace.

As David reminded us a few weeks ago, such Christian hope is not blind optimism or wishful thinking. It is an essential core of our Christian identity, entwined with faith and love, and rooted in God's goodness and love for the world and God's heart for justice. It is renewed and fulfilled in the redemption of Jesus Christ and is a hope that leads to action as we care for creation and love our neighbour as ourselves.

So this vision of the world at peace that Isaiah portrays, this vision of hope, is a vision of the Kingdom of God, and is a vision we need to hold onto and strive for as Christians today, despite much of what we see around us. If we are tempted to despair, or to just accept that this is normal and we should simply get used to it, that is when need our faith. We need to hear again Jesus' voice saying it doesn't have to be like this. Jesus said kingdom of God has come near. Jesus' death and resurrection inaugurated God's new kingdom on earth. It has already begun and is a work in progress until it comes to fulfilment when Christ comes in glory.

Luke wrote this Gospel at time when the early church was often persecuted, and he seeks to encourage and bolster the faith of his fellow believers. The Gospel is addressed to someone called Theophilus, likely to have been an educated Greek, but it would also have been read more widely, initially most probably to or by Gentile rather than Jewish converts to Christianity. Much as they might have longed for Christ's speedy return, Luke urges them not to lose heart or be led astray. Through the words here, Jesus assures them that he will be with them in their trials and that through their endurance they will be saved.

And they are words of encouragement for us. I asked earlier, where is God in all this hardship? God is with us, where we are, in what we do. So, we too should not lose heart in the face of adversity. It may take endurance and great faith to see Christ at work amidst the chaos of the world, but it is happening, nevertheless.

And my other question, how do we navigate these times? God has work for us to do in bringing in God's Kingdom of peace and justice. In the passage from his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds us to get on with the work that God has given us and 'not be weary in doing what is right'. So we need to keep striving for peace: peace with God through prayer; peace with ourselves through accepting who we are, made in God's image; peace with others, especially through forgiveness of those with whom we disagree or have been hurt by; peace with God's creation by living in ways that refrain from further harm. We need to keep striving for justice in the world wherever it is lacking, doing whatever is in our power to counter injustice. That may be through donating to foodbanks or by buying Fairtrade to support those who suffer economic injustice, or perhaps by supporting the various Christian Aid, Oxfam and other campaigns for justice. And we need to keep striving to love our neighbour as ourselves, something we come back to time and time again. Something that is at the heart of our faith as we seek to see the face of Christ in the faces of others.

Working for peace, justice and love in these times as we strive to bring in God's Kingdom. This is our sacred task.