

25th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Luke 21.5-19

In many ways the world of today's Gospel mirrors our own. Jesus tells his disciples about the warning signs that will come prior to the destruction of the Temple – something that was achieved by the Romans when they destroyed Jerusalem in the year 70 – but they are warning signs not to be feared. Jesus is telling his disciples then, that there is a great level of hope to be had amidst what might seem the most disastrous of situations. Jesus is telling his contemporary disciples – us – that although there may be warning signs for our church they are in fact not to be feared rather that there too is hope amidst what might be worrying and anxious times for the church.

For some time, much has been made about the end of Christendom, about the end of the large denominational Christian religion, about the decline of Christianity and about the decline in the belief of God. This is not something that has recently appeared on the horizon. It has been one of the driving forces behind the advance of secularism in western society since the beginning of the enlightenment. What this has meant is that God has been slowly but surely pushed out of a prominent place in contemporary society. He has been reduced to a deist god that sits high above humanity and on occasion intervenes, but otherwise stays well and truly out of 'our way.' There is also a decline in the general ability of politicians, journalists and academics to begin to properly and deeply understand the theology of Christianity and to even think of how Christianity properly and appropriately can comment or critique major political, justice, societal, economic and educational structures. Caricatures of Christianity, Christ, and the Church abound because of this steep decline in understanding. What has caused, in part, this most recent outcry against God and especially against Christianity has been the fact that the church and God have both refused to die, have both refused to conform to expectations, and both show every sign of continuing in the world. There is certain fury being directed at the church as a result, almost as if to say 'How dare they continue to exist!?' 'How dare they continue to worship God!?' 'How dare we continue to call elected leaders to account!?' 'How dare they continue to call society to a measured and reasonable discussion about the responsibility that each human person has to the community!?'

The era of Christendom has for us, ended. The culture around us is no longer delivering large numbers of people to church on a Sunday and though we still have some stake in the 'rites of passage' that take part in people's lives, that is slowly ebbing away. With the sometimes-vitriolic argument directed against Christianity and the changing cultural landscape that is hostile, indifferent or ambivalent to the church, it can seem that we are living in a time that echoes with the words of Jesus in today's Gospels. None of this is truly a bad thing. I know that in a sense, it is my role to speak words of hope and to bolster our sense of faith and place in the world, but take me out of my role as a Deacon, a curate in this parish, and I still believe that this time, this very moment is one of the most exciting, breath-taking and fulfilling moments to be a Christian.

I believe that as a church we have moved past the angst that nostalgia and memory can cause and that we have now moved into a time that stands out with promise and hope. I believe that it is actually something to celebrate that being a church-going Christian now is a sign of personal counter-cultural faith and not merely following community, family or social expectations, which may have been the case for many large congregations in times past. The church will not survive in its current form, but then again perhaps it should not, because of what I talked about earlier. God has not chosen to die. God still exists. The Church will continue. It is through this refusal for either to die, or to be relegated to an irrelevant past, that leads to our own determination to live, to breathe deeply of God, to thirst for a better world, to work actively and stridently for what we believe in that leads to the church not surviving, but living as transformed people.

We are a holy people. We gather in worship. We gather to know God. We gather to love God. Christ dwells within us, the Holy Spirit blows through our lives and we are inspired by scripture and formed by sacrament as we gather around the altar to be fed. Holy things are being given for Holy people. We gather in this church to receive the gifts of God for the people of God.

Part of the key to our future as the people of God rests in the second half of the gospel: "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... not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls. (Lk 21.14-15,

18-19)” Much of the church has often acted like all institutions that have been threatened, plans are enacted, mission statements are issued, speeches about mission are made, but what underlies the latter part of the gospel is reliance on Christ himself. You may remember the first commandment: “I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other Gods before me. (Deut 5.6a, 7)” Or you may remember the first of the Great Commandments: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. (Mark 12.29b-30)” All things stem from our worship of God and we place our trust, our faith and our reliance into God. When we do this as a church, we discover not only the life that God gives but also what God asks us to keep and to abandon. Again, there are Holy things for Holy people.

We live in what is now the post-enlightenment world. It is a world in which the human-made utopia as promised by secularism and progress has failed to provide and failed to live up to its promise. We are now in a world in which the church should have a voice, to speak words of hope and justice, to work for both and to proclaim the work of God in the world. This is the mission that we are called to undertake: to live for God, to love God, to worship God; to proclaim the work of God’s Son, Jesus Christ; to be open and willing to the work of God the Spirit; and finally to proclaim life and hope and love to a world that sometimes seems a little short on all three.

May the Lord bless you, keep you, sustain you and protect you as you step out in his service to the world, with love, justice, compassion and life. May he give you the words and the wisdom for your work. Amen.