

A couple of months ago I stood here and attempted to illuminate another hard saying of Jesus - one from Luke 12, when Jesus talked about division in families and said he didn't come to bring peace. I wonder if I'm being tested, because here I am today and our Gospel tells of Jesus predicting destruction, persecution and betrayal. Not at all the positive message of an easy life we want to hear.

The disciples were sitting in the temple, marvelling at its beauty, perhaps still imagining that Jesus could magic up the easy life. The temple had been the focus of Jewish worship and ritual for nearly a thousand years. It was rebuilt after the return from exile and Herod had started a decades long project to expand it on a grand scale. By the time Jesus and his followers were sitting there, the sanctuary and most of the surrounding courts were complete and many areas were highly decorated.

The white marble stones were impressive - some were 12m long and 6m wide, the front ones covered in gold. The temple was a huge, dazzling and seemingly permanent home for worship till the end of time. Jesus, however, shatters the dream.

*“As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.”*

That's not a comforting thought. Something so central, so solid, so beautiful will be torn down, completely and utterly? - noooo, surely not. And yet the disciples do not argue with him that it will not happen - they believe him. But they do want to know when it will be and how to tell it's about to happen.

When a aeroplane disaster happens we often read stories of people who missed the plane - or those who just managed to get on it. A reprieve or calamity for those families. I think we'd agree would be so useful to know when the apocalypse is likely, what the signs might be.

Wars and earthquakes were regular events in the region in Jesus' time and famine and crop failures were also common. But the complete destruction of the temple was on another scale. In our time, the image of the World Trade Centre buildings crashing down comes to mind. The total destruction of a temple to earthly pursuits, followed by nation rising against nation, conflict tearing up cities and farmland triggering homelessness and food shortage.

Those events happened 20+ years ago and sadly we see much the same things still today. Civil war and famine in Sudan, the war in Ukraine, nation against nation in the Holy Land; food insecurity in Yemen, South Sudan; earthquakes in Afghanistan and Fiji. 2000 years on from Jesus' time not much has changed. Security, peace, and diplomacy have given way to fear, violence, and terrorism. Some international experts worry that we are closer to nuclear war than during the cold war. Is the end time finally near?

The people way back in Isaiah's time also knew about war, destruction and hardship. The final chapters of the book of Isaiah reflect the struggle between the returnees from exile in Babylon and the remnant who had stayed in Jerusalem under Assyrian and Babylonian rule. The two groups had both suffered for decades but had evolved differences in worship and theology. There seems to have been a lot of conflict as they learnt to live together again.

Isaiah brings them a vision of harmony, equality, long life, fair pay, housing for all.

*No longer will they build houses and others live in them,  
or plant and others eat.  
They will not labor in vain,  
nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune  
Never again will there be in it  
an infant who lives but a few days,  
or an old man who does not live out his years*

Isaiah sees a world where both groups co-exist, letting bad memories go.

*The former things will not be remembered,  
nor will they come to mind.*

There will be *new heavens and a new earth*. A fresh start for the whole of creation.

Isaiah brings a message of hope over despair. Never again will the bad times return, no longer will people seek to dominate each other, will fight over land and beliefs. It's a message we long for too. One we heard last week and will again in Advent, our time of waiting in hope.

*The wolf and the lamb will feed together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox  
the sound of weeping and of crying  
will be heard .... no more*

Our wonderful creator God will recreate Jerusalem to be a delight and his people a joy.

On that day we can join with Isaiah in saying

*"I will praise you, Lord.....  
2 Surely God is my salvation;  
I will trust and not be afraid.  
The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defence;  
he has become my salvation."*

Isaiah, whose own name means God is salvation, reminds us that the only path in times of calamity and despair is to turn to God, to trust him, because he alone is our salvation.

Just as water is essential to all life on earth, the water of salvation is essential to our spiritual life. Isaiah urges us to joyfully draw water at the well of salvation.

It brings to mind Jesus talking to the woman at the well

*...whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (Jn4)*

At our baptism we give thanks for the gift of water, a sign of God's presence as the Holy Spirit moved over water in the beginning of creation, at the parting of water in the exodus and at Jesus' own baptism. The water of salvation truly sustains life.

Jesus brought, indeed bought, our salvation through his death and resurrection, opening the door to the new heavens and earth. Jesus reminds his disciples that winning life, eternal life, is our primary goal.

We don't know when *our* end time or *the* end time will be. But as we wait, we need not fear says Isaiah. The Lord will be with us and we will be able to sing together in praise.

And till then? What should we be doing?

We can sing in praise today. God hears our cry, even today as the earth groans and weeps. We can sing in hope and joy that he is with us always. Jesus calls us to stand firm as we wait.

Here in Cambridge we are not persecuted - although we can at times feel like a beleaguered minority. Soon it will be Advent, almost reduced to being celebrated with a Disney chocolate calendar.

As followers of Christ, we are called to stand up, to bear testimony to him, to his message of hope and salvation. Are we brave enough? Jesus reassures us that he will give us words and wisdom as we argue our case that there's more to Christmas than commercialism, that the birth of a baby outweighs Santa's sack, that joyful carols make better music than cheesy pop songs.

Imogen has been reminding us that the marks of mission we feel least comfortable with are telling and teaching about our faith. I'm certainly not going to ask you to stand on a street corner with a megaphone, (I won't be there either) but I do urge you to listen for opportunities to share your story, to speak up against secularism, to bring our faith perspective to the important debates around us. We need not worry about what to say, Jesus will guide our mouths to speak well in his name, to bring his message of hope into the dark.

We can commit ourselves to winning life; to nurturing those things which bring us closer to God: pondering his word, praying, listening for his voice, noticing the wonders of creation and giving him praise, welcoming his presence in our daily tasks. To live into our vocations, as Imogen put it this week.

We don't know when the end time will come when all earthly temples will fall, but they surely will at some point. Till then, Jesus urges us to stand firm, to live each day joyfully, trusting that God is with us. Being faithful, steadfast, persevering here and now. Jesus calls us to be present and faithful to him in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

The new heaven and earth is already sure through Jesus' birth, death and resurrection. Each hair on our head is already cared for. We can surely join the people of Zion and sing for joy, for the Holy one of Israel is amongst us.

+ Sing 'Alleluia' (just sung before gospel)