

St Luke's, Tutshill 1/12/24

Luke 21: 25-36 – Living in the Contradiction

Prayer

I am living a contradiction. Friday evening in Chepstow – Christmas market, lantern parade with the children, Father Christmas coming to town and my chance to switch on the Christmas lights – great fun and jollity – ho, ho and more ho. Sunday morning – church for the first Sunday in Advent, no flowers, one candle lit on the wreath and another three to go before we are allowed to celebrate, and readings which are no one could describe as 'Christmassy'. Serious, invitations to reflect on the Advent themes of judgment, heaven and hell, repentance...

Maybe I'm not the only one living a contradiction, because maybe you want to take the Advent themes seriously too and prepare your heart for the celebration of Christ's coming. You can have a let-off next Sunday because it's Family Nativity, but don't get too merry – it's back to repentance the week after that and all the way to Christmas. Living in confusion then, as well as contradiction, because I have school Christmas plays, Christmas concerts and I might be Father Christmas too once or twice, at the same time that Advent is telling me to wait and prepare my soul in reflection, repentance and stillness. Anna and I will be following the Advent readings from Isaiah 40 through to chapter 54 and Revelation chapter 19 to the end and then Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians – all reminding us to reflect on our own state of preparation to welcome Jesus. There's quite enough to do to get ready for Christmas without having time to worry about the state of my soul, thank you very much.

I'm hopeful that we may find some help in our reading from Luke 21. Jesus gives us plenty to worry about, using the language of apocalyptic he is talking about the world of politics and international relationships and wars and problems in the natural world, the environment cracking up – people *faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world* in the words of verse 26. And in verse 32 – *this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place*. Now this is slightly tricky because there is a double meaning here. In one sense this was literally true when the Romans demolished Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70 – a generation on from when Jesus was speaking. The Jewish world fell apart, but although it felt the end of the world for them in global and historical terms it was relatively small. So there is a second sense in which *this generation* includes everyone who lives between Jesus' first coming and his coming in glory – which is yet to come. In this sense every generation can see our world in Jesus's words. Until his kingdom come there will be trouble on earth – its shape changes all the time. Today we see Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Afghanistan, the decimation of our biodiversity, the effects of climate change. That's another contradiction – here we are, living pretty comfortable lives for the most part – but aware that many others are not. This is the time of year, I think, when these contradictions can seem most acute. The year that Nelleke, my first wife, died, I remember feeling quite detached from everything to do with Christmas. I went through the motions for the sake of my boys, but it wasn't real. And maybe through your own circumstances you might be feeling detached from it all.

So what does Jesus have to say? Verse 28 – *now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads...* This verse reminds me of the story of Job in the Old Testament. Now proverbially we talk about the patience of Job, but have you read the book? For much of the book Job is - understandably – questioning, moaning and generally banging on about how unfair life is. And his friends are of no use whatsoever. And this goes until chapter 38 when God appears and tells Job, *Gird up your loins like a man!* Stand up, man, I want a word with you. Stand up, stop fretting about all

the confusion and contradiction in your life. Stand up and pay attention. The rest of the book of Job shows us God giving Job as it were a guided tour of the wonders and mysteries and magnificence of creation. Yes, your life is hard but look at the bigger picture.

Stand up – Jesus treats us with dignity; he invites us to be confident in him, be confident in our faith. In verse 28 Jesus continues – *your redemption is drawing near*. We have lit the first candle, confident that we will get to the fourth candle celebrating the coming of Jesus. Last year in Advent I wrote a poem – sadly it's just as relevant this year:

Advent 2023

The dawn from on high shall break upon us
with starburst white hot shrapnel.
Maryam sits weeping with Rachel in
tunnels where vengeance is wreaked and conceived.

Gabriel is coming through still rubble streets.
His purpose is clear, while other eyes flit
fearfully searching for bread or a tin
of boiled chicken or surplus sardines.

Lo-Ammi deep rumbles secure in his tank,
phosphorus-tipped shells at command of AI,
the drone-driven destroyer.
Salvation comes to him, not from him.

While Maryam weeps,
one side of her Gospel, the other Jihad
and the child within her
will be born.

Stand up, and the next thing Jesus says is *Be alert* – verse 36. Be aware of what is happening in the world and what is happening around us in our community and in our family. Be alert to opportunities to pray and perhaps speak the name of Jesus to someone. I had a conversation with a lovely person at the till in Tesco's talking about Christmas when she said that it's all about family and presents, and I went, *No it's about Jesus*. We had quite a good conversation, and it really doesn't matter if she thinks I'm a religious nutter.

Be alert at all times, praying... Pray for strength that you will be able to keep everything in perspective as it all crowds in on you. Pray that you will be a person of peace in a manic world. Pray for those who have lost hope and those who feel overwhelmed. Pray that the Lord will deal with your anxiety and fears.

I began by thinking about living in contradiction and confusion. It isn't easy to pull everything together in December; there is so much to do and to worry about. It can seem overwhelming. Stand up, be alert, and pray – and you might even have half a chance of getting through to Christmas unscathed and shining for Jesus. You and I are not going to solve all the contradictions and confusions – that really is not our job. Our passage in Luke ends with the words *stand before the Son of Man* – that's Jesus. He is the Saviour; He is the one who will sort it out and make sense of it all. He is the one we can trust and share in the meantime.

I'll close with a prayer in the Celtic tradition:

I weave a silence on to my lips
I weave a silence into my mind
I weave a silence within my heart
I close my ears to distractions
I close my eyes to attractions
I close my heart to temptations

Calm me O Lord as you stilled the storm
Still me O Lord, keep me from harm
Let all the tumult within me cease
Enfold me Lord in your peace.