

The Second Sunday before Advent

*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary Magdalen,
Hewelsfield, 2024*

Hebrews 10: 11-25

Mark 13: 1-8

‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I had it in mind to preach a rather different sermon until Tuesday, when, following several days of procrastination, Archbishop Justin Welby visited the King, and then at 2 o’clock in the afternoon, announced his resignation. He resigned, as I am sure you are all aware, following the publication of the Makin report into the systematic and horrific abuse perpetrated by John Smyth over decades, and the complicity and cover-up carried out by the Church of England, also seemingly over decades. Whilst of course one can spare *some* sympathy for the Archbishop in terms of the events of the last couple of days, and of course can continue to pray for him and his family as their future develops in a rather different way than he might have expected a week ago, I have read the Makin report and it is horrific. The Archbishop was quite right to have resigned, it is likely that there will be more resignations or sackings in the coming days and weeks of some of the more than 30 members of the Church of England named in the report, and I am deeply ashamed of the Church of England today. I am embarrassed to be a member of this Church.

In a ghastly twist of timing, today is supposed to be Safeguarding Sunday in the Church of England, and I imagine

that little else will be preached about in the churches and chapels of our nation. What we have heard about, I think in more explicit and detailed terms than before, is instances of the abandonment of victims and survivors of abuse, sacrificed on the altar of institutional reputation. People have remained silent, or chosen to close their ears to accounts of the most awful behaviour, the dehumanising of our fellow men and women, in order to protect the name and the reputation of the Church. We might hope that Archbishop Justin’s resignation is the harbinger of a watershed moment in our life, when things will change. We ought to pray fervently for that. But I think this is going to be a bloody time, and he will not be the last prominent member of our church to lose their jobs, and potentially face other proceedings.

Coming out of the temple, one of the disciples says to Jesus, ‘look at these large stones and great buildings.’ Look at this edifice, Lord, the disciples says. And the implication at least is that the disciple is saying this with awe, pride, and wonder. What a wonderful Temple we have. And Jesus says, ‘not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

And of course that prophecy quite literally comes true for the Temple in Jerusalem, which is largely destroyed in 70 A.D., so probably about 37 years after Jesus said those words. At the culmination of a period of serious civil unrest, the Romans lay siege to Jerusalem, and then destroy most of the city including the Temple.

That is the gospel reading that was set for today anyway; I haven’t changed it. And it draws our attention very clearly to the difference between *things* and *the Kingdom*. Between institutions and the Kingdom. I did choose the hymns quite carefully today, and you might have noticed that a lot of them also allude to that theme.

The second Temple, the one in Jerusalem that the disciple was so proud of, was not the same thing as the Kingdom of God. The Church of England, thank God, is not the same thing as the Kingdom of God. One is transient, and destined to disappear. Its redundancy is baked in. The other is eternal, and enduring. And when we confuse the two, when the maintenance of the reputation, the standing, the structure of really any human institution becomes more important than the justice, mercy, and love that are the hallmarks and witness of the Kingdom of God, we have got things badly wrong. We have mistaken one thing for the other, and in doing so we betray the Kingdom, and the precious, holy souls that make it up. And that is grave sin.

I have been a member of governing bodies of all sorts over the 20 years of my ministry, and most of them have had some sort of risk register. And interestingly the bigger and more complex the organisation the more that 'reputational risk' was talked about. What will we do if they discover we made a mistake? What will we do to protect our legacy? How do we present ourselves the best we can? That it could be possible that individuals or an organisational system could end up in a position where collusion, silence and betrayal of individual souls was considered an acceptable sacrifice for reputation shows us just how very badly wrong we can get it, when we mistake the organisation for the Kingdom. So that's the message, on this second Sunday before Advent. It would have been the message anyway, but it's clearer than ever this week.

In a moment or two we will recite the Nicene Creed - which celebrates its 1700th birthday next year, by the way. You will notice that at no point during it are we required to say that we believe in the Church of England. Notice that. There is nothing in the Creed about the Church of England, and praise God for that. What we *are* asked to state our belief in is Jesus Christ, and his body on earth, what the theologians call the 'holy Catholic

and apostolic Church', which is not about an organisation; for it is about a family made up of souls - precious, valuable souls, each known by God, and loved by God, and who matter to God.

Our first reading defines membership of the holy Catholic and apostolic Church: 'hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and bodies washed with pure water'. It's a description of baptism. When God comes to meet us, we enact that outwardly with water, but what matters is what happens to our hearts. They are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience. Friends, that is the definition of the only church that matters. Everything else can fall to dust. And one day it will. But the breath and the kiss of God in the heart and the soul of the people God loves is eternal. Is a Sacrament. A promise that is never broken. And is a truth that must be safeguarded.

One other verse from Hebrews: 'let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.' Two things are true at the same time. The Church of England has been exposed. God is faithful. The two things are not the same as each other. So at the end of this service we will sing about God's faithfulness, and before that we will hold our hands out again, this Sunday just like last Sunday, and receive free grace. Bread and wine. And yet, mysteriously, God. God who comes to meet us this Sunday, like last Sunday, because he is faithful, and he is searching for true hearts to sprinkle clean. That is his way. And we must remember that. The large stones and the large buildings are going to tumble down - probably already are -, and to try to prop them up artificially at the cost of the souls of the Kingdom would be close to blasphemy. The Kingdom is coming anyway. Not with stones, structures and archbishops. With water and hearts transformed. With bread and wine. With mercy, and healing, and judgement, and new life. Where the least in this world's broken economy are going in ahead. Amen.