

LUKE 21:5-19
ST JOHN'S, 17.11.19, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

Every so often, a devastating natural disaster takes place, which is on a scale to shake us out of our complacency that fire, famine, conflict and flood are just the way the world is. This last week, our news has been of floods in England and Venice, and of bush fires in Australia. It's not that long since forest fires were raging in California. Earlier in the year, Hurricane Dorian devastated the Bahamas, and Europe suffered an intense heatwave which killed nearly 600 people.

Today's reading includes some phrases which seem to speak powerfully into such situations: *the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down (v 6); there will be terrors and great signs from heaven (v 11)*. When we think about the various disasters which have ruined peoples lives, we're left with massive questions, which can be summarised in one word: WHY?

There's no satisfactory answer to that question, of course. But even so, as we consider this passage, we can find assurance that despite all appearances, our creator God hasn't lost control of his creation. We have been warned that such things will happen. And our Lord has given us his guidance as to how not to lose our faith in him, even in the face of disasters on the scale of what we're seeing this week.

Jesus' followers, then and now, are not to be dazzled by magnificent buildings and outward show; we're not to be fooled by false messiahs;

we're not to be terrified by fire, famine, conflict and flood; and we're not to prepare our defence, even though we know we'll be persecuted. So let's think a little more about each of these warnings, and how it might be relevant to us today.

DON'T BE DAZZLED BY OUTWARD SHOW

Jesus begins this speech in response to his disciples' admiration of the Jerusalem Temple. Throughout the ages, people have built beautiful places in which to worship. There's nothing wrong with that. A beautiful church can lift our spirits to the Lord. A beautiful church can point people towards the Lord, whether or not they know him for themselves. A beautiful church can glorify the Lord. There's no reason why the Lord of all creation shouldn't be worshipped in a building which is as beautiful as human beings can make it.

But there's a danger here as well. It's all too easy for the building to become more important than the Lord. Meeting the Lord is an uncomfortable business. He asks us to change the way we live. He asks us to put him first in our lives. He's very demanding. It's so much easier to serve the building in which we worship, than it is to meet with and serve the Lord we come to worship. The church is a significant building in many parishes. It represents high moral standards and a traditional British way of life. The people of God need a building in which to meet. If we're not careful, the needs of the building, the demands of maintaining a beautiful church, become the focus of our spiritual life. Take heed of Jesus' warning: don't be dazzled by

magnificent buildings and outward show. Make sure that the focus of your spiritual life is the Lord, and not the Lord's house.

DON'T BE FOOLED BY FALSE MESSIAHS

See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, "I am he!" and, "The time is at hand!" Do not go after them (v 8). It's easy to think, "I wouldn't be fooled", but scary when we realise how many people have been duped by charismatic leaders who've claimed to have a hotline to God. Just to name a few examples: (1) Sun Myung Moon, who founded the Unification Church. He claimed to be the Second Coming of Christ, humanity's Saviour, Messiah, Returning Lord and True Parent. (2) Apollo Quiboloy, who founded and leads 'the Kingdom of Jesus Christ the name above every name', who claims that he is the 'Appointed Son of God', and has about six million followers. (3) David Koresh, who died at Waco in 1993, who called himself Son of God, and the Lamb who could open Seven Seals.

The scary thing is that often the people who are taken in the likes of Moon, Quiboloy and Koresh, are Christians who haven't ever really understood the Gospel message, Christians who may have been faithful churchgoers, but who've never taken the trouble to study the Bible properly. We all know that Jesus is coming back one day. So if we meet someone who claims to be Jesus, how do we test their claims? Remember, the Moons, Quiboloys and Koreshes of this world are very attractive, very charismatic, very persuasive people. But remember also, that Jesus has told us that no-one will miss him when he comes again, *in a cloud with power and great glory* (v 27). People

who are clued up about the Christian faith aren't very likely to be fooled. So take heed of Jesus' warning, and make sure that you are clued up, so that you're not led astray by the next impostor claiming to be God's Son or some such.

DON'T BE TERRIFIED BY UPHEAVALS IN THE WORLD

Fire, famine, conflict and flood and their consequences provide plenty to scare us. We witness them every day, brought into our living rooms, and even to our 'phones, by the power of TV and the internet.

Our reaction to all this, as Jesus' followers, is to do everything we can to help the people affected. But we're not to be terrified, or even worried. Such things will happen. They're an inevitable part of life in the age between Jesus' first and second comings. They don't mean that the end is nigh; they're simply things which Jesus says *must first take place* (v 9).

DON'T PREPARE YOUR DEFENCE

Jesus warns his followers that they'll be arrested and persecuted, betrayed even by their nearest and dearest, and that some of them will be put to death. The world hated Jesus enough to have him put to death; the world will hate his faithful followers just as much. Jesus warns us what will happen, and he tells us not to prepare our defence. If we're put on trial for our faith, Jesus promises us that he *will give us a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict* (v 15). Persecution is an opportunity, an opportunity to tell people what God has done, both in Jesus, and in our own lives.

We're very fortunate to live in a time and a culture in which we're not very likely to be persecuted for our faith. Having said that, it's becoming increasingly difficult for us to live out our faith without attracting trouble. But there's an implicit challenge here: if you were put on trial, accused of being a follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

CONCLUSION

Jesus warns us what we can expect to happen throughout this age. Everyone will be affected in some way by the events Jesus mentions: wars and insurrections, great earthquakes, famines and plagues, dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. Jesus' followers will experience persecution. They'll be arrested, handed over to synagogues and prisons, and brought before kings and governors. Some of them will be put to death; all of them will be hated because of their faith in Jesus.

Jesus' first followers saw the beginning of all the things which Jesus prophesied here. Over the next fifty years or so, there were enormous upheavals, including the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. That beautiful, magnificent building, the pride of the Jewish nation, was utterly destroyed, just as Jesus said it would be, and it's never again been rebuilt. It must indeed have seemed as if the end were nigh.

Even in the face of such cataclysmic events, Jesus assures us that God is in control. We've no need to be terrified, whatever happens. We know that such events are coming, and we know that no matter

how it seems, God has already won the ultimate victory. Persecution might cost some of us our lives: during the two thousand years of Christian history, there have been thousands and thousands of Christian martyrs. But whatever happens to each of us as an individual, God is in control, working out his purposes, and our eternal destiny is secure.

We're not to be terrified: so how are we to live? We're to ensure that we're living faithfully to Christ, prepared for everything he says his followers will have to face, prepared to endure to the end in the certainty that Christ will return. Right at the end of his discourse, Jesus also tells his followers to *stay awake at all times, praying* (v 36) . . . and ready for Jesus to return at any time. As Jesus says elsewhere: *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world!* (John 16:33).