

SUNDAY 16TH NOVEMBER

Readings: Malachi 4:1-2a; 2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13; Luke 21: 5-19

I am sure we can all remember when setting out on a family holiday in the car, almost as soon as you turned out of the driveway, there was the cry from the back; “Are we nearly there yet?” It is the sort of question we might well ask having listened to today’s readings. I have to admit that there are times when as we look at the world situation today and begin to wonder if we are any nearer to answering the question, ‘are we nearly there’. But let us have a look at some of the concepts behind these drastic thoughts.

The first place that the reading takes us is to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple after Herod’s refurbishment was a wonderful sight. There were great columns of shining white marble. There was a great vine of solid gold. The huge censers of burning incense were visible from all around by day. The sun reflected off the gold decorations so much so that it was difficult to admire the architecture because of the reflected light. There was a huge curtain that separated the Courtyard of the Believers from the Holy of Holies. It was unthinkable to Jewish thought that anything could happen to this holy place. It was God’s dwelling place, the home of the Ark of the Covenant.

Next we have to think about ‘The Day of the Lord’. Jewish beliefs were that there were two ages. The first was The Present Age which was considered as bad and evil, incapable of being cured and fit only to be destroyed. Then there was The Age to Come. This would be the golden age of God and when Jewish supremacy would be established in the world and God’s rule would be established over everything. In between was The Day of the Lord. Nobody would know when the day would happen, only God himself. The old testament prophets predicted that it would be a time of cosmic upheaval and destruction. It would be a day of terror with fierce anger and desolation. Prophets such as Isaiah, Joel, Amos, Zephaniah, and Malachi all gave graphic descriptions. They said that it would come suddenly; the world would be shattered and the heavens shaken. This was one of the basic thoughts in Jesus’ time; everyone knew about these terrible images. All a bit frightening.

The next place we are led to is the warning of persecutions to come. ‘They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my Name.’ Believers would have to suffer for His sake in the days ahead.

Then we move to the Second Coming of Christ. The disciples had seen and talked with Jesus after the resurrection; they had seen him ascend to be with His Heavenly Father. They had experienced the Holy Spirit coming into their

lives at Pentecost. They were obeying Christ's last command to go out into all the world and baptise in the name of The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They were confident that Jesus would come again. Jesus tells them that on that day they will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with power and great glory. Again, they did not know when but they did expect it to be within their lifetimes hence the urgency of their preaching. It is probably the reason that no one considered that Jesus' life and ministry needed to be recorded until the original eye witnesses started to die.

And perhaps lastly, there is the thought that Jesus will come at the hour of our death. As St John tells us: God so loved there world that he gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.'

Looking back over history, we now know that the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD after a siege to end the Second Jewish uprising by the Roman general Titus. There was great destruction and loss of life. It is estimated that about one million people were massacred and almost as many taken into captivity. Not one stone was left on another. So much so that it is not accurately known where the actual site of the Temple was. And we know that there were many persecutions starting with that of Nero in 64AD which resulted in the deaths of Saints Peter and Paul. They still go on today. Look at the atrocities in northern Nigeria where Christians are targeted by marauding gangs.

So we are left with the other thoughts to consider: the Day of the Lord, the second coming of Christ and our own deaths. The terrible scenario in the reading makes us think of there end of the universe. Astrophysical theorists have suggested that there will be a massive implosion marking the end of the universe. This would rival the creation big bang as the force of gravity overcomes the force of expansion initiated at the creation. There is the theory that the sun will expand as it dies engulfing the surrounding planets including earth. However, I don't think we need to be overly concerned with those thoughts. They certainly will not happen in our lifetimes and will be many, many centuries in the future. That is not to say they will not happen but even the scientific doom merchants have no way of predicting what or when. So now there is Christ's second coming, the parousia, and our own departures to consider.

Let us start with the parousia. We say in the Apostle's Creed, that 'He will come again to judge the living and the dead'. This indicates that God will complete his purposes for humankind in a final, triumphant return of Christ. After all, Jesus taught that 'the kingdom of God has drawn near', that the promises were now being fulfilled in him although God's kingdom had not fully materialised. We are told in Hebrews that He will come to pass

judgement on those who have trusted and welcomed him but shut out those who have rejected him. His coming will mark the final conquest over evil realising a kingdom of peace, righteousness and love - a new heaven and a new earth. There is a thought that since this did not happen within a generation of his lifetime, it could mean that He comes to us as we accept his rule in our lives. Its timing is therefore undetermined.

So we come to a subject none of us really want to think about - our own deaths. It will happen but when and how we do not know, thank goodness. But we believe when it does happen, we will be safe in the land of 'unsurpassable light' in the presence of Jesus, our saviour, and our God. Death is but the gateway to that closer relationship.

As a final thought, some of these events may be connected. Maybe Christ will come again when we leave this earthly place. Maybe the Second Coming is when we come to the nearer presence of Jesus. Don't be downhearted or despairing. There are some wonderful words of encouragement. The first is that we are never alone. Whatever happens to us in life, Jesus is with us. He tells us that he will never leave us or forsake us. I love the poem that encourages us to raise our right hand when we are in difficulty and put our hands into those of Jesus. He will guide us and keep us safe. Those who believe in Jesus will inherit eternal life. Those who walk with Christ may lose their lives but never their souls. Jesus tells us to keep awake and be prepared because that day will come like a thief in the night.

"Are we nearly there yet?" Only God knows. We commit all these things to God's loving hands.