

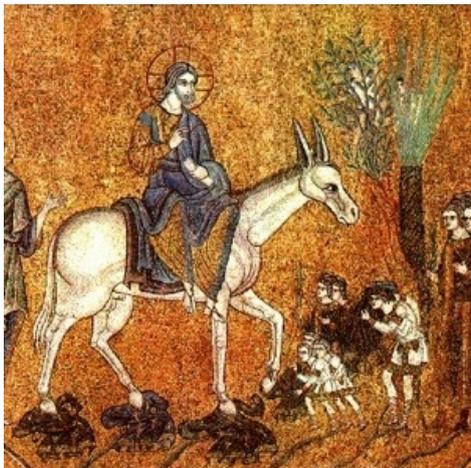
The End of the World

Luke 21:5-19

This has been quite a week. A country not our own has an election to choose a new president, and we, along with the rest of the world, are transfixed. It so happened on Wednesday afternoon that I was working on my sermon. The heading in my Bible for this text was “Signs of the end of the age.”



In Friday's Age newspaper, I came across this letter to the editor, from Jill Mazzotta in Balaclava. She wrote: “While millions of Americans are in rapture at the notion of President-elect Trump, millions of others, and around the world, believe the Rapture is imminent.” I was fascinated by the use of the word ‘rapture’ — a term that refers to what some Christians mistakenly believe will happen at the end of the world. In the last days, many people have resorted to apocalyptic language. The end of the world is nigh. Or, on the other hand, a new age is dawning. I don't think either of these perspectives are helpful. Thank God that we have Jesus' words today to help us navigate these uncertain times.



Jesus is in Jerusalem. He's on a journey to the cross, and this is his last stop. So he speaks with his end in mind. But Jesus also knows that this act of sacrificial love will be a game-changer for the world's future. But the disciples know none of this, even though Jesus has spoken about it. They're along for the ride, and enjoying the experience of following Jesus. Perhaps they are even thinking in political terms. Jesus has just had this most amazing reception when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Perhaps he might be king one day. How good would that be?

We find the disciples in a reflective mood, marvelling at the

beauty and grandeur of the temple. Jesus reply is blunt and provocative: “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” Talk about raining on their parade. It's not that he doesn't appreciate the grandeur of the temple. Rather, he wants to raise their gaze to something more important than this building, as central as it was to their religious life.



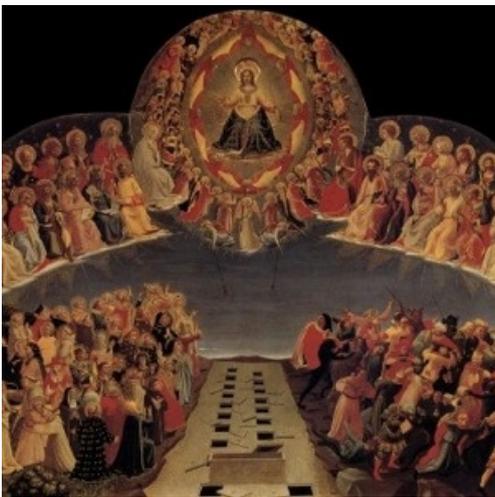
The simple fact Jesus wants to get across is this: what you see in front of you is not the best there is. It's only the penultimate. This world, as good as it is, or even as disordered and fractured as it is, is not the fully story. There's another world being born. I will bring it to birth through my death and

resurrection, and you, my disciples, will be those who proclaim this kingdom to the whole world. And what it is will be fully revealed when I come again.

It's not the stones of the temple that matter, but Jesus "the living stone, rejected by human beings, but chosen by God and precious to him." (1 Peter 2:4). By the end of the week, they were in no doubt about what Jesus words meant. In Jesus, God had begun the process of recreating a fallen, broken creation. Jesus' cross and resurrection was the beginning of the end game.



We live in the space between the cross and Jesus' return, which the Bible describes as the end-times. God's patience and his desire that all people might be saved through the preaching of the good news to the whole world mean that we find ourselves here this morning pondering the end times.



The first thing we need to remember is what we confess in the Nicene Creed: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." This hope protects us from investing in our political leaders a false, messianic hope in their capacity to shape the world the way we want it to function. On the other hand, it also protects us from despair when people and parties in whom we placed so much trust, and hope, either fail to be elected or fail in governing in the way we had hoped. Both of these extremes have been on full display in my Facebook feed over the last days. I've seen more despair than expectation, to be honest, but either way, it's clear that there is deep concern.

God knows our human propensity for idolatry, placing trust in people or things to deliver only what God can rightly do and give. Both party's slogans: Make America Great Again and Stronger Together are legitimate expressions of hope, but there was a great sense of messianic expectation. We need to heed Jesus' caution: "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!'. Do not go after them." These words certainly apply to false prophets and those who claim to be Jesus himself, but also to the way that human power overreaches, and so does the trust we place in it.

Our Coordinator for Youth and Family Ministry, Jordan Smith, placed these words on St Paul's Youth Facebook page on Wednesday. Again they remind us who is in charge, and where we are called to both place our trust, and direct our prayers:

"Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you." - 2 Chronicles 20:6

"God brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing." - Isaiah 40:23

"Dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations." - Psalm 22:28



God doesn't rule through weapons, polling, political strategies and media manipulation. He makes his wisdom known through the church. We bear witness to the suffering love of God for the world through the cross of Jesus. As I said a few weeks ago: "The truth is that God wins. God's kingdom will come. The death and resurrection of Jesus is confirmation of this strange victory. "Stay calm. Don't be afraid. God is in control. The planet is not slipping through God's fingers. Persevere in prayer. Love until it hurts. Lord Jesus, your kingdom come."

Early Election Results Are In:
Christ Still On His Throne



Today Jesus gives us further insight into what it means to walk the path of sacrificial love, as he did. There is no way to sugar coat these words: the church will be called to suffer for the name of Jesus. Disciples will be arrested and sent to trial. Family loyalty will go out the window. People will be divided along the lines of faith and unfaith. Yet in the middle of what seems to us to be chaos, the good news will get out into the public realm. Christians will speak powerfully and persuasively of what God has been up to in Jesus. They will "martyr" themselves, that is, "bear testimony to me," Jesus says. This will only happen because Jesus is in the middle of all this. His words and wisdom will be directing activities. Speaking through us of a world that is better than this one. That this is not as good as it gets.



We do see increasing signs in Australia of how the Christian church is being marginalised. The Equal Opportunity (Religious Exemptions) Bill went before the Victorian Parliament this week. Its effect would be to restrict the rights of religious organisations to recruit staff that share their visions and values, yet not requiring the same of secular organisations, like forcing a political party to employ someone who espouses the views of the opposition and actively works against it. The same is true in issues around the beginning and end of life, and the vilification of those who speak in favour of the current definition of marriage, or who speak out against the detention of refugees.

But if you were a Christian in Laos, Pakistan, Vietnam, Syria, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, China or Egypt, to name but a few countries, you would know exactly what Jesus is talking about. You might have been imprisoned simply because you converted from Islam, or have been found guilty of "utilising a cult to undermine law enforcement" because you confessed Jesus as Lord, and not the state, and gathered like-minded people around you, or you spoke to someone about your faith, or you were in possession of a Bible.



I think many of us find this change of atmosphere somewhat bewildering. It might be hard for us to understand how this gospel message could be bad news for anyone, but it stands counter to almost all of the messages that constitute our culture's story: that we are self-made, independent of one another and any higher power, that we are the sum total of what we own and what we make of our lives. But we say otherwise, and we live otherwise. We believe that the fullness of life is found in Jesus Christ. And our mission, if we choose again today to take it up, is to live in such a way that shows that we believe that Jesus has come to bring life, the fullness of life. Jesus calls us today to stand firm, and we will gain our souls.

Today we will gather as a community to make some critical decisions about our future. I pray that we do confidently, because we believe that Jesus will come again, and that God has commissioned us to grow as disciples of Jesus, confident, loving, and hopeful in him, wanting to pursue God's mission to convince the world that he offers a better life, a better hope, a better future. Amen.