

**Jesus and ultimate things: sermon for the second Sunday before Advent, November 17<sup>th</sup> 2019, preached at St Peter's church, Nottingham by Rev Christopher Harrison**

Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time. He has been greeted as the Son of David, the Messiah, by ecstatic crowds. He has driven out the traders from the Temple, the heart of the Jewish religion; and now he predicts that even worse is to come: the temple, he says, will be destroyed and not a single stone left on another. The language of that passage from St Luke's gospel is dramatic and disturbing; Jesus talks of imminent wars and revolution, earthquakes, plagues and persecutions. But what did he mean by all this?

One of the events which Jesus seems to have been predicting was the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Romans. There had been a revolt by the Jewish zealots against the occupying Roman powers, and the response by the Roman army, under General Titus, was swift and severe. The Temple was destroyed, as was most of the city of Jerusalem. The temple treasury was robbed and the gold and sacred vessels taken off to Rome. Many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem were slaughtered or taken into slavery. The Arch of Titus in Rome commemorates this victory.

This morning's reading also, however, uses imagery from the Old Testament about the so-called 'Day of God'. In the writings of the prophet Amos, for example, there are prophecies of various calamities and disasters, which will be God's punishment on the Jewish people for doing wrong – for acting unjustly, for corruption, for living in excessive luxury, for paying only lip-service to God. Today's gospel also contains echoes of the book of Daniel, which was written between one and two hundred years before the time of Christ. This book was written to encourage the Jews in resisting oppressors, and includes what is called apocalyptic writing; this is a description of the end of the world and of all things, including a great battle between good and evil which leads to the final judgement of all people. There are similar descriptions in the book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament. But in fact all three gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke also talk of Jesus returning to judge the world, which will be the climax of a time of social and economic chaos, wars, and great suffering. This is where Jesus' description of his separation of all people, at the end of time, into sheep and goats, the righteous and unrighteous, comes in. For this was one of the things that the Jewish people, at the time of Jesus, were expecting the long-awaited Messiah to do - to come to

earth to be its judge. The first Christians also adopted this expectation. And this is what the Church continues to declare in its creeds – its statements of belief - that Christ will come again to judge the world, although we do not know when.

Emerging from all this are three questions in particular, which I want to look at briefly:

- Will Christ come again, and when?
- What is the nature of Christ's judgement of us and the world?
- What does all this say about life after death?

On the question, first, of whether Christ will come again, and, if so, when: we can't say that he won't, but we have no clear clues as to when. Through the centuries people have looked for clues, especially in the book of Revelation, but none of them have proved to be accurate. The book of Revelation isn't a coded description of the world of today; it was written to encourage the Christians suffering persecution under the Roman Empire, to strengthen them in the confidence that they would eventually triumph, and to show them that Christ was stronger than all earthly rulers. Its descriptions of heaven and hell are illustrative rather than literal truth. But all the same, we still have to live as if Christ could come at any time; we need therefore to be prepared to meet a king – not an earthly king, but the only true eternal king, the king of heaven.

Secondly: what is the nature of Christ's judgement of us and the world? Are some people condemned, and others admitted to heaven? Or does this run counter to the fundamental Christian belief in a God of love and forgiveness? Do we all go to heaven whatever we do, and, if so, do we simply have to say sorry to God and say that we believe that Christ died to save us from our sins, and everything will therefore be all right in terms of our going to heaven?

Jesus gave many sinners a fresh start by forgiving them their sins, which was deeply controversial as only God could forgive sins. But he was also very severe towards certain people who went against the will of God and his law of love, especially the hypocrites – those who pretended to be holy but actually weren't; the wealthy who misused their money or who put it before God; and those who committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. What this shows is that God does expect something of us in return for his love;

God needs us to respond to his love by at least an effort to live a life in accordance with his teachings. However, if God really is ultimate and total love, he will continue to love us until all souls are brought back to him, however far they have strayed. We see this in the parable of the lost sheep. So even if this involves God bringing human souls back to him after this life, as in the Catholic belief in purgatory – the continuing purification of our souls in the realm beyond the grave – God still wants all souls to be ultimately his.

Thirdly - what does all this say about life after death? There have been various theories and beliefs within and beyond the Church, over the centuries. According to strict Christian and Jewish beliefs, the bodies of the dead are actually raised at the end of time, which is when your eternal destiny becomes finally clear. St Paul, however, wrote about his belief in a spiritual body, which we inhabit after death. The body in which Jesus was seen after rising from the dead clearly had some connection with his physical body, since he was seen talking, eating and showing the disciples the wounds he had suffered on the cross, but since he could come and go at will, even through closed doors, it can't have been a fully material body like ours. Some Christians believe in the immortality of the soul, in other words that the soul exists before coming to earth as well as after death. Alongside these beliefs, there are also some people within the Church, who do not believe in a soul, or heaven or hell; you simply live and then you die. Such a view, which is sometimes called a materialist position, is not mainstream Christian belief, although many people in society at large subscribe to it.

However, in spite of the dominance in much of our modern society of the materialist viewpoint, more and more people are coming back to belief in a realm of existence which is separate from and distinct from life here on earth, though connected with it. There is quite a movement, now, to study near-death experiences. In these, people who have come very close to dying are able to describe what appears to be another dimension of existence which is, arguably, fuller and deeper than our earthly life; a realm in which there is an awareness of timelessness, and glimpses of understanding which somehow put the limitations of our earthly life into a totally new perspective. Quite often there is an awareness of other spiritual beings; sometimes there is a profound sense of joy and peace; some people mention a feeling of reassurance, acceptance and divine light and love. Some talk of glimpses of heaven; whilst this isn't something which can be proved on a

scientific level, it is surely deeply encouraging to us, as Christians, to hear of experiences which are consistent with our belief in eternal life.

In conclusion: I have tried to give a brief survey of thinking about Christ's second coming, about the question of his judgement of the world; and of ideas about life after death. At the end of the day, though, we can strive for knowledge about these things, but there remain – at least at present – major limits to our understanding. But we can and should believe, however, that when Jesus came to earth he showed us and all humanity the way to live lives in accordance with what God wants of us – love, forgiveness, mercy and compassion. If we can trust in him, and have faith in him, that makes a huge difference to our ability to live such lives. And when we pray, 'thy kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven' ... this means no less than whatever heaven is really like, however wonderful, glorious and full of God's love that realm may be, each one of us must strive to play our part in hastening the time when this world may be a mirror of heaven – where people live in peace, where differences between people are celebrated and not a source of division, where all are able to feel that their life is worthwhile, and where God is known, worshipped and adored. Amen.