

Reflection

As we listened to the gospel reading, did anyone think it strange that, at the beginning of Advent, as we prepare to welcome the Christ child, the lectionary reading is about the end of the world and the return of Christ in glory and power? We are invited I think, to see the connection between the first coming and the second coming, so let's look closer at the reading.

What is the context of this passage from Luke? The disciples and Jesus had entered Jerusalem and come to the Temple. The disciples had been admiring the magnificent Temple building. But Jesus told them: this wonderful Temple you are admiring, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down. What? The Temple destroyed? For the Jews of that time, there could not be a greater disaster! The disciples were appalled to hear this and they asked Jesus: 'Teacher, when will this be? And what will be the *signs* that this is about to take place? This is where our reading begins:

Jesus tells them: There will be strange signs in the sky, the stars, sun and moon. Whole nations will be in distress and in despair. There will be raging tides and roaring seas. People will faint with fear and foreboding as they await impending disaster. It all sounds pretty horrible, doesn't it?

But wait, there's hope! Because all these signs are but omens, portents before the Son of Man comes in a cloud, with power and great glory. So when the people see all these disastrous signs, they are to stand up and raise their heads because their salvation is drawing near. The Son of Man would come again, this would be the Second Coming, the return of Christ. This time not as a baby born in a stable, but in glory and power. God will be revealed to the world and he would put everything right at last. It would be the day of salvation!

And Jesus goes on to say that these disastrous things will take place before the people *then living* have all died. All these horrible things will come before *that* generation has passed away. So hearing these words, the early followers of Jesus believed that the Second Coming would happen within their lifetime. They expected that pretty soon after Jesus ascended to heaven, he would be back again, this time coming on the clouds in glory and power.

So as the days went by, and then the years, and then generations came and went, we Christians are presented with a conundrum. Jesus had said that these things would occur before that generation had passed away. But it has been more than 2000 years, and many generations since that time.

What exactly did Jesus mean when he said that 'all these things will take place before people now living have all died?' We know that those people did not live to see the Son of Man coming back on the clouds. So what did Jesus mean? Before I go on to that, I want to affirm my belief that there *will* be a time that lies in our future in which God will fulfil his promise to renew all things, a time when Jesus will come again and will dwell among us. But clearly it has not happened yet.

Having said this, I also want to remind you that before he died, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit upon his followers, and true enough, at the first Pentecost, 50 days after his death and resurrection, the followers received the Holy Spirit, evidenced by the tongues of flame that alighted on each one of them. We could say that through the Holy Spirit, Jesus *did* come back before that generation had passed away. Similarly, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is already present to *us*, dwelling within and among us.

And so, whilst there is a future in which Jesus is coming again and we place our hope in this Second Coming, there is also a sense that Jesus has already come back, though the Holy Spirit.

What about the signs that Jesus spoke about that would accompany his return? The signs of disaster that would make people faint from fear? If we were to travel back in time to the historical moment in which today's gospel was written, there is no doubt that the Christians of the time would have been feeling that they *were* indeed seeing the signs of the end times – terrible upheavals, turmoil and suffering.

What did the Christians of the day see? They saw the Romans destroy the Temple in Jerusalem, just as Jesus had foretold. They saw the Emperor Nero persecuting Christians and throwing them to the lions. All around them was chaos and disaster, and they would have clung to the hope that all these signs were an indication that Jesus was coming imminently to put things to right, to bring salvation. Just when things were at their darkest, when it appeared that the world was coming to an end. That's when they expected Jesus to return.

And in the 2000 years since Luke wrote his gospel, hasn't humankind continued to see the signs of the end times? Horror and distress, fear and foreboding aplenty. Until the present day.

We who live in Australia today are also being confronted by the signs of great upheavals and disasters around the world. The reading speaks of strange things happening to the sun, the moon and the stars, and who can forget how during the terrible bushfire season of 2020, the sky turned red then black and the sun was blotted out by smoke? When we read of the roaring of the seas and raging tides, don't we all naturally think of global warming and the rising oceans?

The reading speaks of people fainting from fear: And are we not constantly bombarded with terrible news of wars and civil unrest? Who among us would ever have dreamed that the US Capitol could have been overrun by an angry mob who were trying to seek out and lynch members of their congress? Who among us could have imagined the awful scenes of the fall of Afghanistan and people clinging to the wheels of aircraft taking off?

And even in a country like Australia, where we are ostensibly at peace, we have seen anti-vaccine protests where serving police officers have been attacked. And what about the pandemic, that has changed the world as we know it? It is no wonder that we sometimes feel overcome with fear and foreboding.

Yes, we do seem to live in terrible times. But it is precisely at such a time that Jesus says: 'stand up and raise your heads, because your salvation is near.' Jesus assures us that these terrible things we see are not the last word. When we see these things happening, then we will know that the Kingdom of God is near. Very near.

But when will the kingdom come? Don't you sometimes feel that it's very hard to wait patiently for the day of salvation? There is a song by the group U2 called Peace on Earth, and it goes like this:

Heaven on Earth
We need it now
I'm sick of all of this
waiting around

Sick of sorrow
I'm sick of the pain
I'm sick of hearing
Again and again
That there's gonna be
Peace on Earth

Aren't you sick of the sorrow and the pain, sick of waiting for peace on earth to come? Today we lit the candle of hope, but how do we sustain our hope? For me, one way to live in hope, is not by just waiting around for God to come and fix things up. We live in hope by always looking around to see the *signs* of hope. Where is God moving today? What is God doing? And how can we, as followers, *join* in the mission of God to bring about that day of salvation.

The reading says: 'Be careful not to let yourselves become occupied with too much feasting and drinking and the worries of life.' We live not just to enjoy ourselves. Neither are we to be preoccupied by our own worries. Rather we are to keep alert, to watch for the coming of God, to notice where God is moving so that we can *join him* in bringing about heaven on earth.

I was so inspired by the videoclip of that young Pacific Island leader, Breanna Fruean that we watched. The Pacific nations are at the very forefront of the looming climate disaster. They have so much to lose. The rising seas threaten their very existence. If anyone has the right to despair and to fainting from fear, it would be them. And yet, this young woman say to us: We are not drowning, we are fighting.

All around the world, whole countries may be in despair. But as we approach Christmas, we Christians are reminded that our hope rests in God. Our reading from Jeremiah reminds us that we can trust in a God who fulfils his promises. God promised that a righteous branch would spring up from the house of David, who would execute justice and righteousness in the land. That promise was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. And Jesus in our gospel reading made another

promise, that, when things look their darkest, when things look terrible, that's when the Son of Man will come among us. God will not abandon us in our distress, but will draw closer. The kingdom is very near.

We have lit the candle of hope. Our Christian hope is not some kind of wishful thinking. Our hope is based on having seen God fulfil promises in the past, and trusting that he will continue to fulfil his promises.

So are we drowning or fighting? Are we giving up because of all the bad news we see all around us? Or are we going to see where God is moving and join him to bring about the Kingdom? We didn't have the opportunity to address the world at the Glasgow climate summit, but we can act in our own sphere.

For you, It may be by running the Lindara markets where the proceeds go towards supporting families in crisis. Or it may be by donating to the Christmas Bowl, which you have been doing year after year. And I am sure that there are many other things you are doing collectively and individually that I am not aware of. Acts of kindness, generosity and compassion. Thus we not only *look* for the signs of hope, we *are* the signs of hope in a despairing world.

So at the beginning of Advent, I say to you: 'Stand up, raise your heads, because your salvation is near'. Do not let yourselves be occupied with too much feasting and drinking or the worries of your life. The Son of Man *is* coming. Let us not just sit around waiting for it to happen, let us instead do our part to bring about the Kingdom of God. Amen.