

SERMON FOR 2ND SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT AT GW HC: 17 NOVEMBER 2024 (based on Daniel 12:1-3, Mark 13:1-8, and Heb: 10:11-14; 19-25)

End times..?

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Our news broadcasts seem full of bad news at the moment. What with climate change causing floods, weather events, as some like to put it, of 'Biblical proportions', along with certain election results, and now today's doom-laden readings, how are we to react? Give up, because the end appears nigh? Or do the best we can for life as it is now, looking all the while on the bright side. And believe it or not, we can draw positive conclusions from our readings. Take the word apocalypse, conjuring up as it does images of destruction on a catastrophic scale. It actually stems from the Greek word for uncovering and, in biblical contexts, is usually a disclosure of something hidden, a prophetic revelation. For example, the Book of Revelation, in Greek *Apokalypsis Ioannou*, is John's revelation of the end of the present age and the victory of good over evil. But, because the path to ultimate victory involves suffering and destruction, a word that once meant simply a revealing has come to have negative connotations. So, should we be worried, or reassured? Let's explore what lies behind the revelations we have been presented with in today's readings.

The focus of Daniel's apocalyptic prophecy is on judgement and justice, meted out by God, who remembers all of the faithful and eternally shames those who deserve his condemnation. And there is a good reason for that focus. In the second century BC, King Antiochus IV criminalised the practice of Judaism and desecrated the Jerusalem temple. The Jews had lost their centre of worship, the very dwelling place of God - and with it, perhaps also the ability to discern God's presence. They badly needed to feel that despite their current trials and tribulations, there would come a time when their loyalty would be acknowledged by the Almighty. Reassuringly, Daniel's vision also includes a protector, Michael, God's angelic deliverer from suffering. So there is comfort in his prophecy – the comfort of knowing that God has not forgotten them, and that justice will be delivered. Significantly, it is one of the first Old Testament texts to formulate a hope of resurrection; "those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake". The *apokalypsis*, the disclosure, is that the world's present suffering is not permanent. And that is good news.

Turning now to our Gospel passage, we can immediately see parallels. One of the disciples marvels at the size of that same Jerusalem temple, rebuilt by Herod the Great - and it was indeed a huge feat of engineering. Jesus' response, predicting the temple's destruction, must have been a real conversation-stopper. The disciples do not speak again till they reach the mount of Olives. Then comes the inevitable question: when? "Tell us when this will be and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?". Now, is that a question about the temple's destruction? Or, is it about the end of the world as they know it? Jesus' answer appears directed at the second, implied question. We see here how the possibility of the temple's destruction evokes a similar response in the disciples of the first century AD as had the destruction of that first temple in the people of Daniel's time – it must mean that the end of the world is nigh! Jerusalem's temple was still the centre of Jewish religion, culture and politics, the embodiment of their national identity. Its destruction really would have felt like the end of the world. Yet when the temple was indeed destroyed in AD 70, the world did not come to an end. Jesus reminds the disciples that even buildings such as these are only temporary.

Like Daniel, Jesus does not hold back from talking about the suffering that the world will continue to undergo. However, they are to be aware of false prophets and those who will say that wars and earthquakes and famines are signs of an imminent end. Throughout history, apocalyptic scripture has been read that way, and misreading signs is precisely what Jesus is warning against in our text! As for when that end is to come, he does not say – there is no longer the sense of imminence that marked the Old Testament prophecy. On a brighter note, the suffering that accompanies the end of the old order is likened to birth pangs. And it is in the pregnancy metaphor that the hope of the birth of a new order lies. The world's suffering is not the end - there is an after.

Our passage from Hebrews offers a glimpse of what that 'after' may mean. The author suggests there is hope in the promise that, through Christ's dying for us, we too shall ultimately enter the sanctuary, meaning a holy place, a refuge. And what wealth of comfort that one word conveys. In the meantime, we are encouraged to approach this sanctuary with hope, holding fast to our

faith and inspiring one another to love and good deeds. We are a community of believers, coming together for mutual support and encouragement as 'the Day' approaches. For Daniel, that was seen as the time when the righteous who had died would be raised to everlasting life. In the post-resurrection context of the letter to the Hebrews, it will be the day when Christ returns.

Thankfully, apocalyptic scriptures are not just about catastrophic destruction - they tell of an ending that marks a new beginning, a promise of deliverance, and with it, a new reality, where justice will flourish. Our passages reflect humankind's deepest yearnings to understand God's purpose and find comfort in him. But our readings are not just saying "Don't worry, it's not the end of the world yet". They reveal that when the end does come, it will mark the start of something new and better and beyond our imagining. In the meantime we are not to wait idly, but live life in love and good deeds. We, and the timing of whatever lies ahead, are in God's hands.....that is indeed very reassuring.

In the name of Christ, amen.