

Advent Attitude (Luke 21:25-36)

The church in the West seems shaken by the current Pandemic. Why is that? Have we failed to take Jesus's words about the future seriously? Are we too invested in the present world order and not enough in the eternal Kingdom of God?

How do we cope with catastrophic changes in our world?

Over the last couple of years our world has been turned upside down by the impact of the Pandemic on all our lives. It has been a catastrophe that has brought radical change and many of us are and have struggled with that.

In fact the church has been caught up in the challenge and seems to be suffering as a result. In recent surveys most churches like ours have only about 70% of the number of people in church in person that they had before the pandemic with many people less willing to help out or volunteer and many people critical of how the church has responded.

Of course the Pandemic is not over and we hope that more will return and our volunteer teams will grow again, but we are left with the question: is there something about our attitude as Christians in the United Kingdom that has left us unable to cope with such catastrophic changes in our world?

After all Christianity grew up in a time when life was much tougher and civil wars and pandemics were common. Yet the church grew. In today's world the church is growing in parts of the world, where there is much greater poverty and insecurity, but in the comfortable West it is in decline and seemingly badly knocked by the recent pandemic. What is it that we have missed as Christians in the West.

I would like to suggest that we have taken on board a view of the world, society and history that is driven more by the society around us than the truth of the gospel. In particular we have lost the big picture that Advent is meant to remind us about.

Jesus Knows the Future

Our reading comes at the end of a speech by Jesus. It is a speech, where Jesus is telling his disciples about the future.

The immediate context is that Jesus has been teaching in the temple precincts. The authorities there have failed to accept Jesus or respond to the challenges of his teaching and Jesus finishes by becoming quite critical of them. All they care about is their own reputations and making money. They do not really have in mind the concerns of God. You see this most sharply at the end of chapter 20.

It is in this setting, that the disciples are admiring the amazing stones of the newly built and magnificent temple. Jesus's response is that the temple is doomed. Not one stone will be left on top of another!

This is of course a prediction that the temple will be destroyed in the years to come. So, Jesus goes on to paint a picture of the future. He warns that there will be conmen trying to deceive Christians, there will be wars, earthquakes, famines and yes even pandemics or 'pestilences.' These things Jesus says will all happen before the end.

Then having summarised the kind of things that will happen in the future he gives a very rough outline of future events.

First of all he warns the disciples that they will be persecuted and rejected by those they go to preach to. This we see happens to the early church, from the earliest days in Jerusalem and as the church begins to spread.

Secondly, he says Jerusalem will be destroyed by armies. This happened in AD70, about 40 years after Jesus was speaking. The Jewish people rebelled against the Romans and the Romans responded by completely crushing the rebels and destroying Jerusalem. The temple was burnt to the ground and has never been rebuilt since.

All of these things will happen as a prelude to Jesus returning.

From our perspective all this shows us that Jesus is clear what the future will be like. He predicts the persecution of the disciples and he predicts the fall of Jerusalem. For the Jews of the time, including Jesus disciples the idea that Jerusalem would be destroyed along with the temple, would mean the end of the world as they knew it. It was a cataclysmic and radical change to all that in earthly terms they held dear.

Yet, Jesus is saying to them. As Christians you can see it differently. You can see it as a fulfilment of what Jesus said would happen and so it can give you confidence that the rest of what Jesus says and especially what he says about his return and the full coming of God's eternal kingdom will be true as well.

The World Order is Unstable

So, that brings us to the next section and the third stage of history, after the destruction of Jerusalem. Here it is more debatable what is being spoken of when Jesus talks about the 'signs in the sun, moon and stars.'

Is this a literal description of the whole universe being shaken up when Jesus returns? Yet it seems to be talking about before Jesus returns.

Is it a more poetic description of the cataclysm of the fall of Jerusalem? Yet it seems to be talking about after the fall of Jerusalem.

The words used come from the Old Testament and are used in prophecies of God's judgement on nations that seem long lasting and secure. The stars, sun and moon are fixed, they are always there and can be relied upon. For something radical to happen to them is symbolic of things that seem fixed and secure falling apart. So this is an apt image of cataclysmic judgement on those nations that seem secure and long lasting. Their time will come to an end and it will be a moment that is terrifying for all those who are invested in these earthly kingdoms.

Jesus says such events will continue through history. Perhaps once again he is referring to the wars, famines, earthquakes and pandemics that he spoke of in verse 11. Jesus says these things will continue through history, so we cannot see them as a sign that God's plan has failed or that Jesus was wrong. Far from it when these things happen, we are reminded that Jesus had predicted them, that is all part of God's ongoing plan and that actually Jesus's return is coming nearer.

It is a reminder for us as Christians not to invest our lives in our present world, that is inherently unstable and in historic terms short-lived, but rather to invest our lives in the Kingdom of God, which is stable and eternal.

Invest in the Eternal Kingdom of God

How do we invest in God's eternal Kingdom. Well in the children's talk we explored how to do that:

Look forward to God's eternal kingdom:

When cataclysm's come see them not as a sign that God has lost control, but rather as signs that God's plans are moving forward that the eternal kingdom of God is a step closer.

Be confident that God's word will be fulfilled, that Jesus will come.

As we lose confidence in our own world order and structures, let's remember afresh that Jesus's words and his kingdom will never fail. After all the worldwide church has continued for over 2,000 years and is still growing, despite all the big changes and challenges that its members have faced down the ages.

Be careful not to be caught up in the distractions of the present world order.

Yes we have to live in this world and be good citizens, employees and employers, but lets not be so invested in the concerns of this life that they become of ultimate importance to us. Rather lets live as good citizens, employees, employers, friends, parents etc., as service to our Saviour.

and let's pray,

remembering that without God's help we can do nothing, but that he promises to are for us and bring us through.

Will you invest in God's eternal kingdom or is your heart really rooted in this world order?