

## HOPE IN TIMES OF TROUBLE

Malachi 4. 1-2a  
2 Thessalonians 3. 6-13  
Luke 21. 5-19

I speak to you in the name of ✠ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Our Gospel lesson for today is one of the more ‘arid’ readings that come up during the Church Year. By ‘arid’ I mean that the passage is devoid of the colourful images that preachers love: today we have no lost sheep, no sower with seeds, and no rebellious son running off to the far country. Instead St Luke’s account reminds us that the final week of our Lord’s life was marked by continuous encounters with hostile people and distressed disciples.

Jesus and his disciples are gathered at the Temple in Jerusalem. As they stood in one of the courtyards of the Temple, Christ heard one of the disciples marvel at the beauty of the magnificent structure. Hearing these words, our Lord turned and said: ‘As for these things that you see, the day will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’

You can imagine the disciples’ shock on hearing Jesus make such a sobering prediction. The Temple was enormous; and it looked like it would last forever. Anyone who travels to Jerusalem today will eventually be brought to the Western Wall. In a whisper, your guide will point out that the surviving portion of the Temple Wall has twenty-four rows of stones above the ground, each weighing over one hundred tons, with another nineteen rows under the surface. The Wall is immense, and it throbs with the prayers and fervour of believing Jews; but the Temple rose about seventy-five feet *above* the wall that you see in modern Jerusalem.

And the Temple, which was constructed on top of the Walls, was covered with ornate golden plates. Josephus, the Jewish historian, reports that ‘the splendour of the Temple ... radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays.’

*This* was the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet still Jesus insisted: ‘... the day will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’ Christ had a clear sense of where history was going. In less than forty years after his dire prediction, the Romans destroyed the Temple and levelled Jerusalem in an act of incredible cruelty that may have cost the lives of over one million people, with countless more driven away or carried off into slavery. When the Romans left, Jerusalem was literally thrown down.

As our Lord gives this prediction, the disciples are puzzled. They ask him when this is going to take place, and what signs will signal the imminent arrival of that event. Interestingly, Jesus never answers the question, ‘When will this be?’ He talks around it. He talks of signs, but not of the end. He talks of persecutions, even within families, but says that these events come way before the end. He talks of endurance, but never states endurance to what end. We are apt to get so caught up in the images and the themes of the passage that we might not realise that Christ gives us the slip once again. He will not be pinned down.

But that leaves us asking, ‘Where is the good news in all of this?’ Are we simply to brace ourselves for suffering? Are we waiting only for the promise of the future? *What is God doing for us now* as we face the cycles of tumult that whirl around us (and they will continue to do so)?

The first answer to that question is found in our Lord himself. When he suggests that we need not ‘prepare a defence in advance’ because he will give us the words to

say, he is suggesting that he is with us and that he will not abandon us. Indeed, his presence will strengthen us and make us very bold. We will know what to do and what to say; we will have the courage to carry on; we will be able to stand fast to the end.

And this leads us to the second and perhaps most important answer to what God is doing. God is already establishing the new age among us. He has already inaugurated that 'great day of the Lord' that is referred to in our Old Testament reading from Malachi.

You see, if we look closely, we find that there is a paradox. The new age comes not with wars and insurrections, but in the quiet of a night. The new age comes not with a violent uprising, but rather *has already come* with the birth of a child in Bethlehem. The new age comes not by resisting the forces of empire, who control with the threat of death, but rather with a journey through death to new life, which God has accomplished in Jesus. Thanks to him, death and its power have been destroyed.

The wars and insurrections, even in our day, are the dying cries of the kings of this world. The God of the universe has subverted their power and has already sown the seeds of the new kingdom, the new reign of God, within our world and within our time-frame. For those of us who have the faith to see this and the courage to endure, the tumult of the world becomes both more and less than what it is.

Let us be honest. The wars, the violence and the cosmic signs announced by Christ are indeed terrible. In them, all humanity suffers, oppressed and oppressors alike. God too, suffers with us. This tumult, of which our lesson today speaks, assumes that terrible powers have been unleashed in the world.

But these terrible powers do not have ultimate power. They cannot control our Lord, and they cannot control those who are named and claimed by God in baptism. Though the powers may kill us, yet they do not harm us. 'Not a hair of your head will perish,' says Christ. God's love is stronger still.

So we are not to be fooled by the endless cycles of violence in our world. We see them and take them for what they are: the death throes of our own sinfulness, on a grand scale. Yes, we struggle against them. But at the same time, we see God's action which is hidden apart from them. We dare to hope for the reign of God, that reign which was promised and which has already begun, even though it is not yet fully present. We put our hope not in our great cities, nor our beautiful churches, nor our military might.

We hope in the crucified and risen one, our ever present Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.