

Advent 1 2021

Hands up if when you heard the news of the new Covid variant your heart sank. Were you afraid that Christmas might be off? Were you thinking 'How long, O Lord?' And perhaps the new we've told you this morning hasn't helped either. It's not the end of the world but it seems sometimes that the world as we know it is coming to an end. And Storm Arwen doesn't help either – another reminder of the fragility of our planet when we're all so aware of its fragility. What awaits us all – if not us, then our children and grandchildren. I suppose we have got used in the years since the second world war to stability; we have lived through one long reign which somehow we have taken for granted and has given us all a sense of continuity and security. Perhaps we forget that much of human history is not like that; for every period of calm there is one of stormy seas and scary waves that threaten to engulf. That's the situation into which today's gospel is addressed.

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

The ancients looked to the heavens for order and changelessness. The appearance of comets, asteroids or shooting stars disrupted that order, disturbed their peace and made them feel that the whole universe was imperilled.

People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Jesus is not talking first and foremost about our generation. Prophets actually rarely look that far ahead. Their words are intended for their immediate hearers – these words for both those first heard them and those who heard them decades later – but within living memory for some – courtesy of Luke the gospel-writer.

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

Apocalyptic fantasists may try to read these words as referring directly to our age and there have many down the centuries who have predicted the imminent second coming and end of all things, but these words are meant primarily for the first hearers of them and the generation that followed. But there is a word for us in all of this because ultimately the message of Jesus – his word – speaks to every generation, and, as he promised:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

And isn't my very reading of those words this morning a demonstration of their truth?

So what is the message, what is his word for us?

Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ^aas soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ^bSo also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

People around may be fainting from fear and foreboding but those of us who look to Christ, who listen to him, know that when winter is at its freezing, stormy and barren worst, spring will soon be on its way; it'll soon be snowdrops and then the crocuses and daffodils and the bluebells and summer will be with us. And it won't be exactly the same as last summer; some things won't return, others will have needed severe pruning to survive and flourish, new seeds will have been planted: the landscape will look the same but different. Everything changes over time; nothing that lives remains the same.

And as spring follows this coming winter I will be moving on in response, I believe to the call of God to minister the gospel in another place. I will be celebrating Easter with three villages and living in a very new community that also needs a Christian presence and ministry. There will be an exciting but also slightly daunting mix of the old and the new. I have known the parishes for a long time. When I first became an incumbent back in 1998, when I was vicar of Waterbeach and Rector of Landbeach, they were neighbouring parishes and in the same deanery. Two boundary changes later the villages found their way into the North Cambridge Deanery and I was their Rural Dean. They have spent more years than is fair in interregnum and have lacked a consistent ministerial leadership for many years. They need to be loved with the sort of ministry St Paul exercised amongst the Thessalonians.

Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

That sounds in the translation a bit judgmental, but I don't think Paul's words have quite that meaning. 'Restore' is more like 'bring to completion'; and it's not that they lack faith, but they are not the finished article yet. Who is? But the absence of Paul's face-to-face presence has deprived them of what they need – the chance to grow and move on in faith and their own living out of the gospel.

I think those three villages and the new communities that will be emerging need that sort of loving ministry that Paul speaks of. He knows he needs to be with them:

“Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.

And he knows why. That

the Lord [may] make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

It's that love of Christ that inspired Paul that also calls and occasionally fills me. That's why I must go for there are sheep of another fold who need a shepherd. But it's that same love that makes it very hard – very hard – to leave. It's not easy and it's not going to be any easier these coming months. So we must pray for one another.

A final word about faces.

There is something about seeing one another face to face that is irreplaceable. Paul sought to make good by writing two letters to Thessalonica, but he knew it wasn't the same – he yearned to see them face to face. We've been able to better than writing letters these past 20 months; we've been able to see each other, to see our faces through the miracle of modern technology, but it's not the same, especially as most of the time you have been able to see me but I couldn't see you. And even now it's a bit the same. Your faces are mostly swathed in masks. I can't tell you how difficult I found that in the first months of us being able to be back in church. I've got used to it now and it's much better; at least I can work out who you are, but I can't see you smile and I miss that. It's a real reminder of how important our face to face encounter is and how much we have lost in these days. But can I assure you that I made it clear to the bishop and archdeacon way back in this pandemic that I wasn't going to leave here until I felt we were back in business again, that we were able more or less to see each other face to face and to feel the blood of our shared community life flowing through the veins again.

And one final face that I – and many of you – have come perhaps to see more in these days: the face of the earth, the expression that strikingly Jesus uses towards the end of our gospel reading. And he

does use that word, the same word as used for a human face, the prosopon, the face of the earth. The earth has a face, a way it relates and interacts with us. The earth sometimes smiles, sometimes frowns, sometimes as Paul puts it in Romans 8, groans. Some of us have realised through these difficult days, despite our thankfulness for the our remote communications, that we need to relate to the earth. It was long walks that I needed both for my physical health and also for my sanity that took me through parts of this city and its surroundings that I had barely noticed before. That included of course taking me to those villages and the building site to which we will be moving. But it was in those moments of reflecting on and in the natural and human-made landscapes that I wrestled through my own sense of calling and purpose – as did our Lord in teaching us how to read the signs of the times through contemplating the natural world of sun and stars and seas and trees and leaves. Summer is already near, my friends, even in the depths of winter – and that summer will bring abundant life, ever old and ever new, a summer rich with new possibilities, new vistas, new experiences. We need not faint from fear and foreboding: behold the One who makes all things new.