

**PENTECOST 23C 13-11-2022** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 65.17-25; A song of Isaiah APBA 391; 2 Thessalonians 3.6-13; Luke 21.5-19

*When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.' They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them. 'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. 'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*

You can tell it's almost Advent when the lectionary readings start to sound apocalyptic; because Advent reminds us that we are not only preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the first coming of the Messiah to the world, but we are also preparing for his second coming, his return at an unspecified time to bring everything into the embrace of God's kingdom.

But we are not quite in the season of Advent yet, although if you go to any shopping centre you would think Christmas was next week, not next month. I feel sad that the lead-up to Christmas has become all about buying and selling 'stuff', rather than preparing ourselves for Jesus.

Don't get me wrong, I love giving and receiving presents at Christmas; I enjoy baking cakes and Christmas goodies and preparing to celebrate with friends and family. I like singing Christmas carols and I love watching children in nativity plays.

There is nothing wrong with Christmas traditions that are really nothing to do with the birth of Christ the Saviour; for many if not most people, that is all that Christmas is about. For we who follow Jesus, there must be more than tradition; there must be a commitment to listening to what he says to us, and to doing what he expects us to do.

What does the Holy Spirit want us to hear today, as we listen to scripture? What do we need to hear? In Luke's Gospel we hear Jesus warning his followers that there would be trouble ahead. They were in Herod's magnificent Temple, the centre of the Jewish world, and he predicted it would one day be demolished.

History tells us that the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 of the Christian Era - before Luke's Gospel was written, and perhaps forty years after Jesus was crucified. And we know that Christians in the early years faced persecution.

The 'signs' that Jesus described have happened, and continue to happen, somewhere in the world; there is always a war somewhere, as well as natural and human-made disasters: floods, fires, drought, famine and pandemic.

There are always people somewhere who are being persecuted and punished for their religion or ethnicity or political views or sexual orientation or gender identity.

We live in peace and prosperity. We don't face real persecution, and we are not generally imprisoned for social activism or for peacefully protesting. But as we know, even here in affluent Western Australia there are children living in poverty and a growing number of homeless people.

Isaiah writes of a new heaven and a new earth, where there will be peace and no more suffering. We are happy to imagine that heaven will be like that when we die; but what about our responsibility to renew our world- THIS world?

Our responsibilities, as citizens of God's Kingdom, are articulated in the Five Marks of Mission:

1. To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom (TELL)
  2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers (TEACH)
  3. To respond to human need by loving service (TEND)
  4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation (TRANSFORM)
  5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth (TREASURE)
- This is how we are to live, to bring the Kingdom of God to reality, playing our part in God's transforming dream for the cosmos.

The letter to the Thessalonians encourages us to work, and not to be weary in doing what is right. We are to work together to provide not only for ourselves but for those who can't work or can't provide for themselves or their families. 'But' I hear you say- 'but I can't do anything, I'm retired or I'm too old or I'm too busy, and anyway I worked so hard for years- isn't it time I had a rest? Isn't it time for others to step up?'

I'm here to tell you there ARE no 'others'. We are it- this is the church as it is today. We continue to live through changing times- times of diminishing, ageing congregations, when more and more people do not identify with any religion, when a global pandemic has changed us, when the world looks nervously at the war in Ukraine and wonders who is next.

Our mandate is to work and grow the church so we can reach out into the community, the city, the country, and the wider world. We are to be a beacon of hope, a light on the hill, a sanctuary for all who are hungry and weary.

We don't have the luxury of church as an escape from the real world- although worship can be an oasis of peace in the chaos of the week.

We come together to be equipped for action, to be fed and encouraged to get back out there. Then when we encounter people who are in need, we have something to offer.

We offer what Jesus has offered us: hope, joy, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation with God and each other. We offer practical assistance as we are able, and all this contributes to the kingdom of God in our world.

When you meet later today for the Parish Consultation, please keep all this in mind. Remember what the church is for and who it is to serve.

This and every other Christian church will celebrate the beginning of a new year on the first Sunday of Advent in two weeks' time. This parish is on the verge of another new beginning, with a new Rector and a new vision. I pray that the Consultation will be a time for hope as you seek the Spirit's inspiration together. The writer of the Letters to the Thessalonians gave advice to the whole Christian community, not to individuals. His instructions were to all of them and to all of us: do not be weary in doing what is right. Working together is essential for any church to thrive. We can make a difference; Jesus expects it and the world needs it. The Lord be with you.