

SERMON FOR 2 before ADVENT | 18.11.2018

What a week it has been! Even for those of us who are only mildly interested in politics, it has been impossible to ignore the various twists and turns of the Brexit negotiations. And the complexity of the issues, has led to an increasing unease: is there any solution to this mess and is there any likelihood that the major players in this long drawn out game of chess know what they are doing? Comments like *This is worse than Suez* or *This is worse than the Falklands Crisis* are having the effect of making all of us in the UK feel, genuinely, 'hopeless' about the future. There seem to be no certainties anymore and I cannot remember a time when there was so little confidence in the way things are likely to pan out.

With red hangings in Church throughout the Kingdom season of November, our thoughts here too are focused on 'the last things', although, I hope, with rather more of an upbeat feel than our politicians are able to muster. Two weeks ago we gave thanks for all the Saints - those who have inspired us and guided us in the past; last Sunday we remembered all those who gave their lives for the sake of our freedom, especially in the First World War. Next Sunday we will celebrate the Feast of Christ the King as seven members of our congregation accept his invitation to receive Holy Communion here for the first time.

So as we tackle the bible readings we have been given about death and what will happen at the end of time, we hold on to that important difference between what we as Christians can look forward to, and what the state of our nations might otherwise teach us. As St Paul says, *we are not people without hope...*

And the way that the Bible does this is to introduce us to what is known in the trade as 'apocalyptic' writing. That is to say, when ordinary words fail, we need to discover God's bigger picture, God's more positive canvas.

Today's 1st reading is from the Book of Daniel, written just 165 years before Jesus. After a thousand years as exiles, first in Egypt and then in Babylon, when life seemed unbelievably tough, the people of Israel are now finally back home. But the attack on their identity as a people seemed all the greater because the country was being over-run by a Greek culture that seems determined to obliterate Judaism altogether. Pagan, materialistic, 'fit' and wealthy, the Greek way of life was all pervasive in everything from philosophy to food. Jewish faith and Jewish customs struggled to make any impact against this hugely successful foreign life-style. Even in their own land, Judaism seemed old hat and tired.

The Jewish resistance movement was tiny and they were known as the Maccabees. But through the Book of Daniel they found a way of hitting back: through larger than life stories which, on the surface seemed harmless enough, they engineered a way of refocusing the Jewish resistance movement. Instead of recalling – as the prophets had done – the good things that God had achieved in the past, this new apocalyptic form of storytelling encouraged the reader to look forward to the things that God was planning which would transform the future. One after another the main characters are given ‘visions’ of what the future will look like – always ending with a great triumph over one or another of God’s enemies.

In tone the Book of Daniel reminds us of Churchill’s great speech in 1944: *We shall go on to the end. We shall fight on the seas and oceans. we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. we shall defend our island. whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches. we shall fight on the landing grounds. we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.*

This is amazing stuff given that Churchill’s hearers had already experienced the Blitz. Equally, Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel were spoken in the full knowledge that even the Temple - that great symbol of Jewish identity - would end up as a heap of stones just forty years later. bringing about the kind of despair that we might feel if both St Paul’s Cathedral and Buckingham Palace were reduced to rubble by some invading force. Not surprisingly the disciples stare in front of them. head in hands and wonder what will become of them: *tell us*, they ask Jesus, *what signs of hope can we look forward to?* And on this occasion Jesus has nothing to say except that destruction is the beginning of something new...

It’s not much to go on, is it?

One of the ways our society deals with unrelenting bad news is by sticking its heads in the sand. People try to avoid talking about things they cannot control. Or they trivialize death by dressing up on Halloween or scaring themselves stupid with Horror movies. For the majority, death is the final curtain and the focus tends to be concerned with the way we die rather than whether it can be the gateway to something greater.

So, as Christians, what route can we take to move us on from the somewhat pervasive despair we find around us?

The first is our belief in the Resurrection. Whatever our feelings about the world in which we live, it is as nothing compared with how the disciples felt after witnessing the death of Jesus on Good Friday. Hope, that day, had been wiped out completely.

As St Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth: *If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.* Everything flows from that: Christmas, Holy Communion, the life of the Church: without our being convinced that Jesus overcame death by rising from the dead, we are empty of the resources we need to challenge the scepticism of our age.

Second is our experience that, in strange and seemingly unrelated ways, the power of God's kingdom in heaven is breaking through here on earth. If we look it is there, all over the place.

And this is what the Book of Daniel is trying to encourage in us. Daniel's message was: look for examples of how God is breaking through the materialist Greek world of 2nd century BC Israeli life. It doesn't take much for us to draw the parallels and to say: what are the signs of God breaking through the 21st century postmodern consumer society in which we live? Let's tell each other those stories.

Because I believe the answer in both contexts will be the same: in Latin it forms a familiar ancient hymn: *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.* Where charity and love are found, God himself is there.

As the song says, love is the answer. Love - and hope. Against despair, against political chaos, against overwhelming worry about our health or concern for the future of our planet, we reach out with the Book of Daniel not to the familiar past for a kind of guarded reassurance but to the unpredictable future with all its potential.

In you, in us and in our trust in God lie all the resources we need. Even if the walls of the Temple crumble and all that is familiar disappears, the Resurrection tells us that the power of God is stronger and more resilient still.

Love will hold us up - and God's love, we know, is stronger even than death. So in looking for confidence, let's look forward not back.