

SERMON FOR 2nd SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT | 17.11.2019

Malachi 4: 1-2a; 2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13; St Luke 21: 5-19

Skipping through the pages of the Church Times yesterday my eye was caught by a short paragraph on page 12: Canadian Church warned of extinction by 2040. *We've got simple data that suggests that there will be no members, attenders or givers in the Anglican Church of Canada by approximately 2040* said Revd Neil Elliott.

I have a soft spot for the Canadian Church; we use quite a few of its prayers in our weekly liturgy; Edmonton Cathedral was modelled on the Norfolk parish church I was baptised in and some delegates from the Diocese of New Westminster were particularly kind when I visited a conference in San Francisco many moons ago. Otherwise I have no idea what life is like there. It is a huge country and as challenging a mission field as any other western nation.

But the calamitous warning is exactly the kind of warning that fuels Malachi in our 1st reading. Malachi, writing in 450BC, faces a dilemma. There had been a tremendous amount of enthusiasm when the Temple in Jerusalem was being built by Nehemiah and Ezra sixty years before, but that energy had largely petered out and the prevalent mood of the religious establishment was apathetic and lack lustre. Services still took place but it was all very formal and empty. Rules and traditions were being bent to suit the fashions of the day and divorce and marriages with pagans was widely practiced. Perhaps I shouldn't add this but if you read Malachi you will quickly see that he puts most of the blame on the clergy...

It is all very easy to fall into the trap of reading the newspapers as I was doing, and seeing all kinds of things to depress us. There, in the same edition of the Church Times were yet reports about child abuse, new outbreaks of Ebola, details of the Chinese persecutions of the Uigars and the riots in Hong Kong, the rising pressure on Food Banks: the list goes on and on.

Then we come to Church and we hear Jesus in the Gospel telling his disciples that the familiar and much loved Temple of Ezra and Nehemiah, improved still more by Herod the Great, would end up being destroyed in the catastrophe to come in AD70. Is it any wonder that they – and we – end up asking where God has gone?

We can so easily conclude, in the face of the bad news, that if God exists then surely he must be looking the other way; that he isn't interested in us anymore. Whether that is because we have gone soft and lax as in Malachi's day or for some other reason, the outcome is the same: surely God isn't there.

Of course Jesus isn't saying that at all. Jesus wants to tell us that in fact the opposite is the truth: nothing is going on that unknown to God, that God knew what was going to happen and wants now to encourage us not to be terrified. Because to be terrified is to part of the problem. What Jesus was saying to the disciples as they ogled the gorgeous symmetry of the Temple and reveled in its familiarity was: *don't hung up on these things. God has something in mind for us and what we need to practice now is endurance.*

These things will happen, he says, these things must take place. When all that is lovely to you, when all that is holy is reduced to rubble, do not lose heart. I never promised you a way around the troubles of the world; I only promised to lead you through. Hold on to one another and I promise you, not one hair on your head will perish.

We have reflected often that it seems that the Church is, in particular, one of the places that is falling apart the quickest. We read that we are increasingly fractious, torn apart by division and scandals of all sort.

Yet one of the sayings that bolsters me up when I wonder quite what the future holds is that schism – the basic building block of getting on with people – is far worse than heresy – not believing the same things. What that tells me is that it is OK to disagree, even to the point of others holding views which I simply can't agree with. Somehow God seems to be with us in that place, helping us through our differences and struggles as part of his hugely wonderful role as our father and guide. Staying in communion with one another – holding on to one another through crises of every sort – we are called on to ensure because holding on to one another is how we hold on to our risen Lord.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a world renowned American preacher and teacher, tells the story of a lady who died many years ago at the age of 97. She had been brought up when Russia was still ruled by a Czar and China had an emperor. The only way to Europe was by boat.

One of her stories related to a time when, as a young girl, she and a whole group of girls decided to hitch up their long skirts and climb Mount Washington in New Hampshire. It was a glorious day and they walked too far and stayed too long and before they knew it the sun had set and a foggy dusk had settled on the mountain. They literally could not see their hands in front of their faces.

Torches hadn't been invented and they had no GPS. No one knew for sure the way back along the oath they had taken but they agreed that they would all hold hands – and not let go under any circumstances. And that is how they managed to get home safely. The girl at the front carefully picked her way down, one step at a time, and the others held onto each other's wrists in one long human chain. Every now and then someone would call out that they thought they were going in the wrong direction – but they never let go. *Sometimes, she said, all I knew or could see of the world was the hand ahead of me and the one behind. Sometimes my arms ached so badly I thought I would scream – but that is how we made it at last. We found our way home by holding on to one another.*

Do not allow the news to get to you, Jesus would say to us now, because all these deeply depressing things must take place. All I ask of you is that you learn two things. The need for endurance and the need to hold on to those around you. That way you will find me.

I hope the Canadian Church hears that message too.