

Zoom service – 25 xi 2021

The Old Testament lesson is one of the best-loved bible stories: Daniel in the lion's den. Anyone who has led Junior Church or a primary school assembly—or has been a child at one—has probably experienced it. But, I am sorry, I'm not going to look at it today! I'll leave it with the children, and, in any case, I don't really understand the book of Daniel.

But I shall consider the extract from Luke that we've read today. It's part of a longer passage which is worth reading in its entirety. That's your homework! Earlier in the chapter we read, 'When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he 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." These were people talking as we might talk when visiting a great Cathedral and admiring its beauty, but Jesus's reply is stark. The temple will be totally destroyed. And we know that this prophecy is true. In AD70, after the Romans had fought a campaign against the Jewish—freedom fighters or rebels? Take your pick—their siege of Jerusalem came to an end, and they took the city of Jerusalem, sacked it completely, and totally destroyed the Temple. It's never been restored. On the Temple mount there now stand major buildings of Islam, the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Any evidence of Jewish and Christian occupation has disappeared. Jews now pray at one of the few remnants of the Temple, the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall.

The first part of our reading clearly refers to this. 'When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies then know that its desolation has come near.' Jesus's followers are advised to flee to the mountains. Usually in such invasions people in the countryside seek refuge behind the walls of the city. 'No', says Jesus, 'the city will fall. Make your escape.' As is always the case, those who will suffer the most will be women and children, even more so if they are pregnant or have young babies. Jerusalem 'will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the time of the Gentiles are fulfilled.' Since the Temple has never been rebuilt, 'the time of the Gentiles' has yet to be fulfilled.

When Luke comes to write his Gospel, probably about AD 80-90, the destruction of Jerusalem had already happened, and the people who read or heard his Gospel will know this has happened. They will have experienced the 'great distress on the earth and wrath against this people'. Whether Jesus really prophesied this or whether Luke interpreted what was remembered of Jesus's teaching in the light of what happened is something we have no means of knowing.

But what about the last few verses? This is often regarded as a description of the last times. That is how it may have been interpreted at the time. There is certainly evidence that the early church thought that Jesus would return in power while some of his followers were still alive. But Jesus has already warned against such thinking. As

we read, his disciples “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.”

My own interpretation would be a bit different. Jesus has charged the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people for failing to recognise who Jesus is, and to follow him as God requires. As a result, God will turn away from the Jews, and as a sign of that the Temple, the place where Heaven and Earth have intersected, has been destroyed. God’s presence of Earth is now realised, incarnated in the person of Jesus. As a continuing sign, there will be “distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.” That certainly happened. The Roman peace, the Pax Romana, that Emperor Augustus has achieved, had collapsed, Rome was rotting from the head. Following the appalling Emperor Nero, there was a year with four different Emperors, each murdered, each proclaimed by the military. It was a time of earthquakes and disaster and of course of persecution for the Christians. The powers of the heavens were indeed shaken.

But all of this is not a sign of disaster for the church but of hope. It is a confirmation that Jesus has indeed taken his place at the right hand of God the Father, that they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory’, a quotation from Daniel Chapter 7. But this is not the Son of Man coming down in the last days at the Parousia, the Second Coming, but the Son of Man coming in the opposite direction, following his ascension, up to the throne of God, and so they—and we—should ‘stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’ The upheavals and disasters are a sign that the old order is coming to an end, to be replaced by the approaching Kingdom of God.

And so we must, 2000 years later, continue to wait on Christ’s second coming, long after Luke wrote, aware that we do not know when this will happen, but alert that it may come at any time.

We still see the horrors that Luke describes: “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.” We hardly need to be reminded of this in our own time.

But we must continue to work for the coming of the Kingdom in our own lives and times, to live in the faith and hope that God continues to have control over the world and will fulfil his promises and purpose, and to hold before us the certainty that, as Paul reminds us, ‘faithful is he who calls you who also will do it.’