

Christ Church

Fourth Sunday before Advent

Micah 3.5-12; 2Thessalonians 2.9-13; Matthew 24.1-14

From Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians: 'We dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging and pleading that you should live a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory'.

We are moving towards that time of year when the feasts and fasts of the calendar begin to tumble over one another: All Saints, All Souls, Remembrance - and then the start of Advent. By next Sunday the vestments and high altar frontal will be red for what is unofficially known as the Kingdom season. Today's readings anticipate the themes of the that season: Kingdom, End-Time and Judgment. These are fertile grounds for religious nuttury, for the kind of apocalyptic fervor that can lead to mayhem. You may have forgotten this but the world was due to end this time last week on October 21st according to the prophecy of the American Biblical numerologist Harold Campling. Well here we still are. For now at any rate.

Yet a serious question is posed to us in today's readings. How are we live in the time of the dawning of the Kingdom of God.? For that is where we do live, where the Christian future means Christian hope. Paul invites the Thessalonians to 'live a life worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory'. There is no room for doubt here about the end point. God wants us to come to glory, not to fizzle out in chaos. But the way to glory is not so obvious, how to live that 'life worthy of God'.

I don't want to be quoted by saying this, but it is actually quite difficult to believe in God. I don't mean that in the obvious Richard-Dawkins-against-the-believers sense, but in the sense that what we believe in when we say the word God is often a collection of attributes that we happen to approve of or feel

comfortable with. For some it is quite easy to believe in a God who *gallops about like a galloping cat doing good*¹ and interfering with everything and everyone in a bossy way as he tears up and down the *cinder path* of his own *wrath*. For others, God is an empty space in which serene and uplifting thoughts float like the foamy spheres of a bubble bath above the strife of this world. For yet others, God is down here in the mess and grit of it all, being persecuted, threatened and tortured in the lives of the righteous, and calling out to us to all to do something. We all have pictures of God that motivate us and chime in with our concerns. But we have to watch to see that these pictures do not become idols. When I say it is hard to believe in God what I mean is that it is hard to believe in a God who is truly God, not just the megaphone through which we proclaim our values our interests, our compulsions.

The prophet Micah is scathing about the prophets of his own time and their tendency to tailor their pronouncements to their own interests, preaching what people wanted to hear and would reward. I guess fashionable prophets of Micah's time were the eighth century equivalent of media people and special advisors in the Judean corridors of power. Micah's contemporary Isaiah was such an urbane courtier. Micah pictures these opportunists disgraced when God's silence calls their bluff. They are left covering their mouths with their hands because they have nothing to say. And that gives a new dimension to the vision of Isaiah in the 6th chapter of that book where he confesses, 'I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the Lord'. His unclean lips are cleansed by the searing heat of the charcoal that burns the incense offering at the altar of the Lord. Micah can say of himself by contrast, 'I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin'. His prophetic vocation

¹ Stevie Smith: The Galloping Cat, 'I am a cat that likes to gallop about doing good...'

begins with pointing out the sin and error that he sees around him.

True learning, as those in academic life know, is not just a linear process in which knowledge accumulates without pain.

Learning is constant repentance, recognizing prejudice, letting go of dearly held beliefs, admitting that your vision is limited. And if this is true of the life of the mind, so it is true of the life of the spirit. Getting ready for glory involves self examination and repentance, the purging of our own agendas, the readiness to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn his Gospel all over again and as though for the first time.

And that kind of re-learning, re-remembering of who we are and who God is, is what this coming season is all about. The Gospel gives us an example of what this means. Here is Jesus with his disciples sitting on the Mount of Olives after he has made the astonishing announcement that the temple will be thrown down and destroyed, stone by stone. And the disciples are saying, ‘Come on, now, we are away from the public eye, tell us what is really going to happen. So we know in advance what others do not know’.

You can imagine the kind of answer they would have liked: *On day one the divine trumpet will sound and the great angel will appear on the Mount of Olives. On day two there will be an earthquake in the desert and a great dragon will spring out of the ground spewing blood.* There’s quite a lot of that sort of stuff in the Book of Revelation which is why some thoughtful and squeamish early Christians wondered whether it should have a place in the canon of scripture, but that’s another issue – a subject for a Mattins sermon! The pronouncements of Jesus about what is going to happen are much less precise: ‘many will come’ ‘there will be wars and rumours of wars’. ‘famines and earthquakes in various places’. No dates, no times, no locations.

The only definite thing he will say is that the disciples face a rough time, torture and death await them in this life. Not the vindication they crave, or the glory they desire. The temptation to give up will be all too real. 'Because of the increase of lawlessness the love of many will grow cold'. And yet the promise remains, 'Anyone who endures to the end will be saved'. This is the point of it all, the hard lesson of endurance, patience, faithfulness and a religion where, as Canon Pattison said some weeks ago, there are no short cuts.

To follow Jesus is a constant process of conversion away from the agendas which bring us personal gratification. But it is not all pain and misery. The Gospel is good news, and The Gospel will be preached to the end of the earth. The Gospel is God's total affirmation of humanity as his creation and of each person as his beloved child. All is summed up in Jesus Christ who came among us to lead us to glory. The glory of God as Irenaeus said 'is humanity fully alive', but the second half of what he said (and is less often quoted) is also true, 'and the end of humanity is the vision of God'. To that vision, to that end, in this season we now turn.