18 November 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Second Sunday before Advent
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+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Strength and our Salvation.

At the college chaplaincy discussion group on Friday, the conversation turned to the Church of England Statistics for Mission released earlier this week. The chapel students were universally well informed – one had even read the whole report – and I hope you have all done the same?!

(I haven’t!)

However, it was interesting to see the various spins that were put on these statistics from different news outlets. The C of E press release led with “Christmas attendance up!” The Telegraph had a nuanced “regular attendance rises, traditional Sunday services fall”. And the Guardian went for the jugular with “Attendance at Church of England Sunday services falls again.”

All of those are, of course, true; from different angles, reflecting other sets of attitudes and prejudices. But the approaches to the statistics that I find most interesting are the equally various approaches from ordinary Church of England clergy and worshippers; like the chaplaincy group here. Some see the statistics as arguing that the Church of England is doing everything wrong – either by sticking to outmoded models or by not sticking strongly enough to tradition. Some see them as offering a way forward – though what exactly that looks like depends on who you ask.

For some, they are full of hope: Christmas and cathedral attendance up, attendance overall rising. For some, they are a place of despair.

Hope and despair – themes, I want to argue, that our readings are all about. I think these readings have something to say to the Statistics for Mission and to the various ways we have
interpreted them – and, more importantly, to the way we see ourselves as Christians in this country, with implications for the way we behave and the way we hear God’s call.

The Old Testament and Gospel readings we’ve heard – part of the end of Daniel’s visions, and the beginning of Jesus’ last teaching discourse in Mark – belong to a genre that we’re not always particularly familiar or comfortable with: apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature is a genre that talks about the end times – the end of time. It appears throughout the Bible – in Daniel in the Old Testament, in Revelation in the New Testament, in the books of Esdras written between the two testaments and collected in the Apocrypha – and in Mark, as well as Matthew and Luke, Jesus uses the apocalyptic genre in the reading we heard today.

And it sounds really, really strange – as anyone who’s been using the daily office lectionary can tell you, it’s been taking us through Daniel and Revelation over the last few weeks. Apocalyptic is full of terrifying beasts with unusual numbers of heads or wings or horns, or all three; of creatures who seem to be one thing and turn out to be another; of beasts which eat each other, winepresses of wrath, bowls of poison, war and woe and angels of death.

It sounds strange because it’s a genre we don’t write any more. It’s a genre that does something very specific – it’s sometimes described as the “literature of the dispossessed”. It’s written within communities that are small, oppressed, alienated – by and for persecuted minorities, people who have no political power, who are afraid of their governments or facing hostility from other social, ethnic or religious groups.

Daniel is written for and among the Jews living in Palestine about 165 BC – at a point when they had been conquered by dynasty after dynasty, and they were being ruled by a particularly hostile ruler whose aim was to force all Jews to abandon the worship of God and assimilate to his Hellenic culture and religion.

And for that community, strange as it may sound, apocalyptic was literature of hope. When they read Daniel, what they heard was God’s reassurance that, however bad things got, their community was never outside the scope of his knowledge and care. They heard God’s promise that the unjust political leadership they experienced would one day come to an end. And at the end, in the passage we heard today, they heard God’s promise that at the end of all this, there would be deliverance; renewal; everlasting life.

We need to hear Jesus in the Gospel as using this kind of genre and language. Jesus is addressing the disciples during Holy Week – knowing that their lives were about to change, that they too were about to become a tiny minority, persecuted from all sides. And Mark is writing from that perspective, as one of a tiny minority of Christians, beleaguered and
frightened. To these communities, the words of Jesus are intended to be words of hope: a reminder that God is still in control, that this period of history can and will end, and that after that end, something new and wondrous will come.

For us, as we hear and reflect on the Statistics for Mission alongside all the other reasons for despair, the challenge is to take on that hope. We are not used to seeing ourselves as a minority – and even as the statistics tell us that this is what we’re becoming, we are tempted to try to argue them away. But whatever else we make of the statistics, as Christians, we are losing our cultural dominance. Becoming a minority.

And I don’t think this is a bad thing. It’s salutary to remember that the first Christians, like Jews for much of history, were a tiny minority: opposed on all sides, experiencing hostility and persecution – and yet hopeful, and enthused, and full of love and faith and energy to make disciples. Their hope, as we see in apocalyptic, was in God’s coming kingdom; God’s future; the new things God had begun to do in Jesus and was still doing.

We are standing amid the end of cultural Christianity. The Church will not stay the same – however hard we try to keep up the patterns of Victorian Christianity. It cannot stay the same. But we are people of hope, real hope – people trusting in the new things God is always doing.

And this is the hope that we can hold out to a nation and a world that feels despairing. Brexit negotiations; government in chaos; fake news; Russian interference; economic decline… all these are reasons to despair, unless you are a person of hope. Unless you listen to Jesus’ words. Wars and insurrections, earthquakes and famines – are just the beginning, but God is still in control.

The end is coming; but the end is something marvellous – God’s new creation.

So as the church’s year leads us into Advent, let us pray once more the oldest Christian prayer we know:

Maranatha! Our Lord, come!