

Sermon for Sunday 7 August 2022 – The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Pete Postle, Reader

*Genesis 15.1-6; Hebrews 11.1-3,8-16; **Luke 12.32-40***

The last reading is Luke's version of the end of the world. It is quite clear from the opening address – 'Do not be afraid, little flock' – that Jesus is talking to his little band of disciples. According to Luke, what Jesus has been trying to explain to them for so long now, is that they must learn that the Kingdom of God is not the dreams of another world – a life after death – or a distant goal of history – the Second Coming, aka Judgement Day, aka the End of the World. Rather, the Kingdom is a present possession – not realised by their own achievement (and I think Jesus includes himself there) – but the freely given gift of his Father, because it is his Father's pleasure to bestow such eternal grace on his creatures.

Now, I must pause there to add an explanation. 'According to Luke,' I said. This is because it is quite clear that, if you read and compare the parallel passages in Luke and in Matthew on this matter, you will find that the two Gospel writers have come to very different conclusions on what Jesus was meaning here. This could be because of the people who wrote it. Luke, we think, was a doctor who followed Paul; Matthew, we don't really know who it was – it certainly wasn't Matthew; but it's almost certainly a convicted Jew.

Both Matthew and Luke carry parables, such as this one here, which carry a series of warnings to be on the alert for an impending emergency – the coming of the Son of Man. Like loyal servants, they must keep an all-night vigil in case their master should return late from the celebrations he has been attending (perhaps a wedding; the common metaphor of Christ as groom and the Church as his bride); or not to be taken unawares if a thief should break in. The thief being our old enemy the Devil.

But where Matthew and Luke differ is in the nature of the crisis for which Jesus urges them to be prepared. Matthew places his versions of these parables in the fifth of his great discourses – the one devoted to the Second Coming of Christ. This is in Matthew chapter 24, and if your Bible, like mine has sub-headings, you will find they read things like: 'Signs of the End of the Age'; 'Persecutions Foretold'; 'The Coming of the Son of Man'; 'The Necessity for Watchfulness.' And the chapter ends with the unfaithful slave being 'Cut into pieces and put with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' All good Apocalyptic stuff – and very much along the lines of the then current beliefs. Matthew has taken Jesus' words to develop and explain Jewish ideas about the Messiah and Judgement and the end of this present age.

Luke, on the other hand, follows this passage with one about the approaching climax of Jesus' mission; Jesus begins by saying: 'I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled.' And then there follows a section about the judgement, which is about to overtake the nation of Israel: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.' Luke has put these three

themes together in his mind – he reasons that Jesus sees it all as one great crisis – firstly, his own death, then a huge challenge for the disciples, and then imminent judgement for Israel [Temple destroyed in AD69.] And all of this, contrary to what might be our first impression of defeat and failure, is to be the great triumph foretold by the prophet Daniel [chapter 7, 13]: ‘As I watched in the night visions, I saw one coming like the Son of Man [or: a human being] coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient of Days [Almighty God] and was presented before Him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting one that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.’ World domination for the Son of Man, who himself symbolises the people of God.

Would you agree with me that Luke’s interpretation is the right one? It has all the ring of common sense, it refers directly to Jesus. Can we expect Jesus to have been warning his disciples to be on guard for his return sometime in a far distant future, whose date only His Father knew? – that’s Matthew’s view. Or was Jesus unsure of when the Jewish and Roman leaders would finally catch up with him, and was thus warning his little flock that the start of their great test could happen at any time – perhaps even (or especially) in the middle of the night.

Remember that these Gospels were only committed to paper in their final form some 40/50 years or so after the Crucifixion. But, by then, all those parables had been repeated and retold and preserved, and their warnings of watchfulness were still there. So, the gospel writers have to decide: had these warnings been just for the apostles, as they faced up to the passion of our Saviour, or had they a more timeless, a more permanent meaning to be handed down to countless future generations?

Matthew translates them into his description of the Second Coming. Luke, typically, only hints at such a possibility; he leaves the parables in their original context, and leaves us to decide what we of future generations should now think. He points us that way: in verse 41, he has Peter ask: ‘Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?’ To which Jesus replies with the parable of the faithful or unfaithful servant, which ends: ‘That servant who knew what his master wanted but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, and that servant will receive a severe beating. But one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating.’ Which sounds rather convincingly that Jesus means his warnings for all of us!

Oh dear, when is that Second Coming, then? Acts 1, verses 6 & 7 (after the resurrection): So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.’ That’s us!

So, if you want to follow in the footsteps of those first apostles, here’s the drill: there’s no need to worry about dates, as long as you remain loyal and obedient to the ways of God, as taught to us by Jesus.

Amen.