

St Paul Wimbledon Park

2nd before Advent 18 November 2018

I don't really like starting a sermon with news about my holidays but here we go.

Two weeks ago, I sat in a church in Vancouver, and found amongst the general notices inside the front cover of the service booklet, the following:

Earthquake alert during service:

Stay in your pew or in the building.

Try to get under the seat in your pew.

Use one hand to protect the back of your head and neck. Use the other hand to cover your nose and mouth with a handkerchief or tissue.

Try to remain calm until help arrives.

As I looked up at the stone vaulted ceiling, the implications of getting under the pew were clear.

Two of this morning's readings deal not with what actions to take in the event of such calamities, but with what they *imply*. The verses from Daniel do not promise that such calamities will never occur: 'There will be a time of distress such as has never been ' Earlier in the book of Daniel, Daniel himself was thrown into the lion's den, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace, all without knowing that God would deliver them. Here, in this general warning, there is a promise that God's people *will* be delivered, but that is not thrown out as a lifeline in advance: like Daniel and the others, they will have to undergo the time of distress.

And similarly Jesus prophesies all sorts of calamities - including said earthquakes - as things that 'are bound to happen'. But through them, he says, the birth pangs of the new age begin.

That last phrase is picked up by John in his gospel in the rather more literal sense of child-birth; not in itself, of course, a calamity, but a hard, often painful and potentially dangerous process; but after the woman's child is born, we read, 'she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a child into the world.'

That, of course, is the known outcome. But in the other scenarios described, we do not, and the suddenness of many of them will leave us unprepared. Will there be time to get under the pew as we sit frozen in terror at the building shaking and starting to disintegrate literally over our heads? I couldn't help but have the devastating sense that people who died in the Californian fires this week experienced just such a terrifying sense of being trapped by flames beyond their control as they tried to escape.

These are tough, challenging prophecies and make getting out of the European Union look like a doddle. We might ask what God is doing in the first place (in the understanding that these things *are* part of God's plan). But that, I think, as with the question 'why does God allow suffering?' is to miss the point. The fact is that, while

we are in danger in the midst of these disasters, of **losing** control, God **is** in control, and we **are** promised deliverance.

That is not meant to sound glib, a sort of 'It'll be alright on the night' complacency. But these readings are about the nature of God and our relationship with God, rather than the practicalities of dealing with calamities or, indeed, the theological morality of them. As people of faith, we are called to believe in God's deliverance into a 'new age', the composition and nature of which we cannot tell in advance.

I deliberately used the phrase 'as people of faith' just now, rather than 'as Christians' because the two readings are about God's plan; even the gospel reading reveals that Jesus is not talking about himself as such but pointing to God. Which goes some way to explain the relevance of our middle reading this morning from the Epistle to the Hebrews, which focusses on Jesus, and his sacrifice. In specific, graphic language, we are told that having made that sacrifice, Christ took his seat at the right hand of God, where he waits henceforth until all his enemies are made his footstool. For me, the significant word in that sentence is 'waits' – 'where he waits': the consummation of all things, the deliverance, the new age, is still to come - he 'waits'. But again, the point of this is not what Christ is up to, but about the implications for us. And this time it is not a future promise. It is a **reality** that we can grasp now: because of Christ's sacrifice, and in lovely words: 'let **us** make **our** approach in sincerity of heart and full assurance of faith see how each of us may **best arouse others to love and active goodness** ... encouraging one another' - a prescription for a good life if ever there was one. But then, in the final words of our reading this morning, its relationship with the other two readings is made clear: we should do all this 'all the more because you see the Day drawing near.'

We know that the people of the Old and New Testaments often lived very keenly in the expectation that there was soon to be a total and cosmic change in circumstance, that the 'end is nigh', that a new age was literally about to begin.

Prophecies of timing, of exactly when that might occur have never proved correct – perhaps, we might feel, thankfully so. But in the midst of the earthquake, the tsunami, the rampaging fire, the anarchy of war, who can say that those caught up in the midst of it all have not felt that this is indeed the moment?

For us, ministering to them or to any who are going through a time of tribulation, the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews will be our guide, 'encouraging one another to love and active goodness' knowing that our day may still yet be to come. And on **that** day, may we be as faithful and resolute, in the knowledge that our deliverance is promised by God, through Jesus Christ.

Peter Kettle