

3rd before Advent (Year C): Luke 21 - "Beware that you are not led astray..."

In 1919 the Irish poet W B Yeats wrote perhaps his most well-known poem, *The Second Coming*, a sober musing on tumultuous shifts in the society, politics, the course of history in his day.

*"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."*

Around 30AD or so, Jesus of Nazareth arrived in Jerusalem, the end of a journey which was the culmination of his years of traveling, preaching, teaching and healing. He saw the grandeur of the temple and the exploitation of the poor; the spiritual hunger of the masses and the complacency of the religious elite.

He saw the restless Roman military, eager for an excuse to lay into the Jews they oppressed. He saw a resentful, furious movement of nationalist zealots.

What did Jesus make of it all?

It is a seemingly innocuous observation from companions about the beauty of the temple which prompts Jesus to confront the present predicament and the coming cataclysm. Beginning with the fate of the temple, Jesus goes on to paint a terrifying picture of the shaking of the world. BUT where is God in this? Is he the cause or has God absented God's self and left them to it? Neither, is the answer Jesus finally offers.

But let's back up a bit. What is going on in this strange yet arresting passage of Gospel?

The text is not simply about Jesus predicting the future but:

"an interpretation of history...it would not have taken someone with supernatural predictive abilities to anticipate that [Jesus' people] would get trampled in any war with the Romans. The makings of war had been growing for quite awhile. The Jews truly did suffer under the Roman yoke, and there were constant rumblings of dissent and, on occasion, outright revolt..."

The kind of speech with which Jesus addresses the situation, painting a picture of the cosmos being shaken, is often called apocalypse. Apocalypse means “unveiling”. It is poetic imagery straining to address social upheaval and change and relating it to cosmic realities.

“...what is going on is mixed with what is *really* going on, history being set in the larger context of God’s purpose...” - *Fred Craddock*

Despite our historic, cultural and geographical distance we can nevertheless learn from, and be shaped by, the dialogue Jesus engages in with his disciples. I’ve chosen one sentence which expresses the heart of Jesus’ teaching here, verse 7:

“Beware that you are not led astray...”

Jesus warns of the danger of being led astray. From what? From him, from their relationship of trust with God, and therefore the kind of life to which they are summoned by God.

Let us consider three ways in which Jesus’ followers then, and now, and in every point in history in between, might be led astray:

pride in human creations...

false promises from deceitful teachers...

by fear.

1. Pride in human creations...

Jesus’ companions admire the temple but he quite abruptly tells them it won’t last. It won’t just wear away over the centuries; it will be destroyed violently, not stone left on another.

They must have been bewildered: why was their Master not as affected by such an awful prospect as they were? Does he not regret the coming destruction of the temple as they did?

Actually, yes, Jesus was affected: he soon weeps over Jerusalem, for those who are so bent on building it up and with confrontation with Rome, that they fail to see how God is working. Jesus weeps, but he knows God’s work continues. God’s work in his world, our world is not confined to any building or institution, country or people.

When Luke and the early Christians finally witness the destruction of the temple, though it might appear to some that God's work has been undermined, it is not so. Despite the seeming signs of disaster, God is still in charge. God is faithful.

Luke conveys Jesus' teaching to the early church and on through history to us, lest we be led astray from Jesus by obsession with our own creations.

"Luke's point seems to be that believers were not to interpret the end of Jerusalem as a clear sign of the end of the world." - *Craddock*

In 1680, Joachim Neander beautifully put into words the contrast between our frail human creations and the sure, strong hope God offers:

*Human pride and earthly glory,
Sword and crown betray his trust
What with care and toil he buildeth,
Tower and temple fall to dust.*

...but Neander continues:

*But God's power, hour by hour,
Is my temple and my tower.*

If a human creation such as the temple cannot be trusted, what then? Where do Jesus' followers look for certainty and direction if reliable institutions and monumental creations can crumble into dust?

To refer back to Yeats' poem, if the centre cannot hold, when things fall apart, when mere anarchy seems to be loosed upon the world what then? When the old certainties break down, when there is political crisis, climate crisis, religious crisis, humanitarian crises... what then?

Inevitably there will be those who will exploit chaos and uncertainty.

Demagogues who promise false hope, offer false promises, who declare themselves to be the means of fixing everything. Folk who gain popularity by exploiting prejudice and ignorance

Where old certainties crumble, strongmen who promise strong leadership step in; Jesus

warned then about self-appointed Messiahs. They may not always take on overtly religious appearance now, but the same dynamics are at work today.

Jesus cautions his followers:

2. Do not be led astray by false promises from deceitful teachers...

Yeats observed in verse how:

*“The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”*

How often have you and I seen this in recent months and years:

Those who seem to have moral integrity and wisdom hesitant to offer simple solutions since they see the dangers and know the complexities of life today. Meanwhile, men and women with fewer scruples, more vain ambition, and sinister motives are filled with “passionate intensity”?

Jesus knew of such people, knew how dangerously seductive their claims could be. Little has changed, the danger remains.

Will we be led astray by those who promise simple solutions whether for our spiritual and religious lives, or our politics or our social challenges?

Or will we hold on firmly to the teaching and the person of Jesus?

The temple will crumble, deceivers will come, but the sobering news continues: you will face suffering and persecution, betrayal even by family. What then?

3. Do not be led astray by fear.

Recently, celebrations marked the 30th anniversary of fall of the Berlin Wall.

I saw a short interview with an East German who had worked secretly and peacefully for greater liberty and an end to the separation of West and East. He told how the Stasi recruited ordinary people to do their work of spying for them, turning neighbour against neighbour. He himself had been betrayed by neighbours, colleagues, even family. Yet he was not bitter. He did not allow this to dent his courage and determination.

Hope won over fear.

To this day, a similar experience faces many of our Christian sisters and brothers today. Persecution by authoritarian regimes, and even betrayal by neighbours and family. We rarely recognise just what peace, safety and freedom we enjoy as Christians in the UK. These things we must never take for granted.

If you forget everything else I've said, please remember: pray for persecuted Christians.

What Luke's Gospel offers to any who suffer for our faith is not a plan for escapism. Discipleship is not about avoiding this time of trial, and persecution of the Church continues. Persecution is a part of Christian discipleship.

It's been a while since my last Star Wars reference, so here's one.

Yoda, the great, wise, patient Jedi Master, seldom given to violence, often found in contemplation, teaches the young Anakin Skywalker:

"Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to the dark side..."

It may be sci-fi but it is, strangely, true today.

Fear can often lead us astray. To inaction on the one hand, or to hatred and blame over others. These are three ways of being led astray. The answer is simple yet challenging: fix your eyes on Jesus.

As John Wesley put it:

"In your patience possess your souls - Be calm and serene, masters of yourselves, and superior to all irrational and disquieting passions. By keeping the government of your spirits, you will both avoid much misery, and guard the better against all dangers."

Yeats looked out at his world in turmoil. He feared that a terrible new age was emerging, one without integrity and love, but where those possessed by passionate intensity, would seize the moment. He feared that contrary to the peace child, Jesus of Nazareth, born in a manger, some new force was taking possession of the world:

*And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

...Yeats wondered.

Yet, we have a choice: we need not be dictated to in our lives today by impersonal historical forces, by demagogues of our age, nor by our own fears. We do have a choice.

But let us now be led astray by fear, let us not cling to our human creations as if they offer us true hope for the future, and let us not succumb to the words and wishes of the worst even if they are full of passionate intensity.

Let us fix our eyes instead on Jesus Christ, author and perfecter of our faith, and run with perseverance the race set before us.

Amen.