

1 Thess 3:9-end**Luke 21:25-35****Introduction**

My mother is now very limited in her mobility but she is still very active mentally and enjoys spending her time doing puzzles and watching quiz shows. She also enjoys discussion. Until the Covid pandemic she regularly entertained a couple of ladies from the Jehovah's witnesses for a weekly discussion. They worked through a discipleship course seeking to convert her to their way of thinking. She used to tell me, "They'll never convert me but I do enjoy our discussions". As the pandemic hit and we went into lockdown she received a final phone call from Marjorie, the chief witness. Who said to my mother, "The pestilence is upon us! Prepare for Armageddon!" My mother was very amused – and to some extent so was I.

But there is no doubt that we are currently going through very difficult times of climate change, of war and unrest, of pandemic and financial instability. This week alone we have witnessed terrible tragedy with the death of 27 migrants in the English Channel and the stabbing to death of a 12 year old girl; we have been discouraged by the discovery of a new variant of concern of Covid 19 whilst our peace has been disturbed by Storm Arwen.

Luke's so-called 'little apocalypse' which I just read is a startling passage. There are sobering warnings of distressing times to come looking forward to a dramatic ending when the Son of Man will return in Glory. Recently, there has been a real sense for many of us that the powers of the earth, if not the heavens, have been shaken. It is possible to be overwhelmed by the message of the Gospel and recent world events but, in the light of both, Jesus in his speaking and Luke in his editing offer signs of hope to look for, and ways of alert, hopeful living to be strong in.

So what do we make of this passage? Well, as so often in scripture this prophecy has both, an immediate and a future application. Throughout Luke's Gospel we have heard Jesus sternly warning his audience that in ignoring God's call to them and moulding their religion to suit themselves they are courting disaster. The verse immediately before our reading sets the scene: ²⁰ "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹ Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; ²² for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfilment of all that is written. ²³ Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; ²⁴ they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

This is a continuation of the warnings Jesus has given up to this point. A time of great crisis is coming, in which the failure of Israel in general and Jerusalem, in particular, to repent and follow the Kingdom way advocated

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by Jesus would have its disastrous result. The Romans would come, they would lay siege to the city and the end would not be in doubt. History has borne out this prophecy with the total destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout the world.

This would happen in the lifetime of many of the people listening to Jesus speak. But his words also point forward to another event to the coming of the Son of Man, with power and great glory. The establishment of the Kingdom of God, begun by Jesus through his birth at Bethlehem will be completed, in the fullness of time, when he comes to judge the world in power and glory. The early Christians were daily expecting Jesus to return in glory and some, especially the Christians at Thessalonica had almost given up their daily lives – they had stopped working and being productive and were simply waiting for Jesus to return.

People sometimes wonder why it is that we have waited two thousand years and we have still not seen Jesus' return. Many preachers have used the threat of the ensuing day of judgement to coerce people into commitment. I well remember, as a student nurse in London, my hospital was just behind Oxford Street, there was often a man walking up and down carrying a large billboard that proclaimed, "Repent! The end is nigh!" But scripture makes it clear that God wants everyone to have an opportunity to learn of him, to meet him and to form a relationship with him, which is why time has run on. But that puts a responsibility on us because surely we should be proclaiming God's love and forgiveness to the people we know and live amongst while there is time for them to respond.

Because it is now more than two thousand years since Jesus spoke these words and warned his followers to be prepared for the time when he would return it is easy for us to be complacent, to think it isn't going to happen, or certainly not in our lifetime. It is easy to put things off, to think well I will sort out that attitude or behaviour one day, I will develop my prayer life one day, I will spend more time with God one day. But the whole point is that we don't know when Jesus will return and in fact, I believe, it is later than we think.

If Jesus returned today would you be ready to greet him, to welcome him with joy and without fear, or would you feel ashamed and want to hide

In verse 28, there is the call to 'stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is near'. These are confident, hopeful actions. In verse 31, there is the hopeful assurance that 'the kingdom of God is near'. And in verse 33, we have the confidence-giving statement that Jesus' 'words will not pass away'. Throughout the passage there is an undergirding

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sense of the faithfulness of God fulfilling God's purposes and not being thrown off course by tumultuous events. Alongside this is a concomitant call to faithfulness on the part of God's people.

In verse 27, we have the most exalted image of Jesus in Luke's Gospel: the picture of 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory'. It is interesting that the church's liturgical year ends with a celebration of Christ the King and the next year begins with this portrayal of Jesus. Joel Green in his commentary suggests that Luke has included this material in his Gospel because 'his audience has not been living in expectation of the Parousia'. Parousia, literally 'arrival', refers to the second coming of Christ. Maybe we too can lose sight of or appreciation of the glory of Jesus – something that Advent gives us the opportunity to rediscover, in both the wonder of the glorious one who is to come and the sign of the vulnerable baby of Bethlehem.

One of the things that lockdown has done for us has been to highlight the difference between a relationship with God and our church attendance. I think many of us have struggled to continue in relationship with God without regular worship and meeting together with other Christians. The fact that we haven't been able to be in church, to come together in a building has, for some of us highlighted the tenuous nature of our faith. For some it is clear that their relationship with God has strengthened and grown but others have 'lost the habit' of worship, have found other things to occupy them and have drifted instead of growing in faith.

This advent, as we look forward to the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, can I encourage you to focus on your relationship with the Lord and Saviour who died for you and longs to inhabit every part of your life. How strong is that relationship? How real is God's presence in your life? How important is it to you – or does it get pushed aside by other things that take your time and energy.

A good question to ask ourselves is, "If I knew Jesus was returning today what would I be doing?" Would it be exactly the same as you usually do – or would you have to change your behaviour in order to welcome him. Let's take the opportunity this advent, in this time of waiting, of looking forward, of hope to renew our relationship with Jesus and to make opportunities to share the love and hope he gives us with others.