

Second Sunday before Advent, 16th November 2019

Micah 4:1-2a; Luke 21:5-19

The prophet Malachi, about five hundred years before Jesus: 'see, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and the evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, leaving them neither root nor branch.'

And then there's Jesus, standing in front of the Second Temple, the rebuilt Temple, one of the greatest statements of national rebirth, pride and power that Israel had ever seen. To the Jews, a wonder of the ancient world – like the Kremlin or the White House or Parliament to us. And Jesus says to the gawping disciples: you see these great stones, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one will be left upon another: all shall be thrown down. And indeed within a very few decades that great building did lie in ruins – burnt to the ground by the Romans in AD70.

Doom, doom, doom. There's a school of thought, I know, that thinks I especially relish these passages, that it somehow fits my natural temperament. And admittedly, I do play up to that impression sometimes. But actually, all this doom stuff isn't just me. It's there, in the Bible – indeed, not only in the Bible but on the lips of Jesus. Yes, he's the Good Shepherd. Yes, he is Love incarnate. Yes, he is joy and beauty and grace. And I do preach that, when I can. But he is also the Jesus of Luke 21. He is also the Jesus of the blood-curdling warning, the Jesus of judgement, the Jesus of doom.

Most of us are very uncomfortable with the idea of divine judgement these days – and especially of seeing particular events in history as divine judgement. I remember being really quite shocked, just a few months ago, to read a very well respected biblical scholar saying that the Second Temple really was destroyed as divine judgement. He wasn't saying that's what first century Christians believed, but that it's what we should believe. The Temple burned not just because of the politics and religion and economics and military strategies of the first century, but because God judged and condemned it. And then, soon afterwards, I read one of my real spiritual and intellectual heroes, the twentieth century Anglican bishop and theologian Charles Gore, when asked what he made of the First World War, with all its millions of dead: the first thing he said was, it was a great and terrible divine judgement. What was the ultimate reason for all those dead? Not Serbian nationalism; not dubious alliances, not the nature of capitalism itself – but terrible, divine judgement.

You might think that's just crazy. It's certainly strange. It certainly leaves us with a lot of questions. How can the God who is perfect Love also be the terrifying Judge? Why does his judgement take the form of the Somme and Ypres and Mons, those great killing fields of the Great War, and not, say, a thunderbolt to wipe out Auschwitz? What happens to all the lives destroyed, lost, as part of the great divine fury? And those are indeed massive questions. I am not going to get anywhere near answering them today. An agenda for discussion another time, perhaps. But here, at any rate, are a couple of initial thoughts along the way.

1. However difficult and strange the idea of divine judgement happening in history is, it's arguably not really open for Christians to dismiss it out of hand. Quite simply, there's too much of it in the Bible. It's too big a part of the story, and Jesus Himself seems to have believed and taught it. It would be a brave Christian who decided that on something so fundamental about God and the world, Scripture and Jesus are just outmoded, wrong.
2. Believing that divine judgement really happens doesn't mean that it's obvious when and where and how it is happening. The Bible is full of confident predictions of doom against the wicked, about how God will avenge the poor and the weak, and bring the powerful crashing down from their thrones in judgement. But it's also full of baffled and confused voices, who see that that doesn't happen, again and again and again. Is

there really a God who judges in the earth? It's a question, a doubt, that haunts the Old Testament again and again and again. It is no doubt the question that the disciples asked as they watched Jesus suffer and die upon the Cross, while heaven stayed silent. If one reason we struggle with the idea of divine judgement is that we don't see it happening – well, there is no doubt we have that the people of the Bible did not have before us.

3. Maybe another reason we struggle is because we work with the wrong idea of God. God as some kind of angry parent figure who gets very cross when his rules are broken, who is patient for a while, but then lashes out in uncontrollable, fearsome violence. There is indeed a lot in Scripture and Christian piety to support that kind of view. And for most of us, such a God seems just like the worst kind of human father. If that really *is* God, many of us would rather not know Him.

But what if we thought instead about the kind of creatures we are, and the kind of world God has made? What if it was true that God had so created the world, and so formed us, that actually the only way for us to really live, to really flourish, was by sharing our lives and our wealth in patterns of justice, mercy, and peace? What if loving is actually, in the long run, as basic to human flourishing – personal and social – as eating and drinking and breathing? What if love wasn't just a nice suggestion, a good idea – but just the truth about what we're meant to be?

Well, if that's so, then it might just be true that any person, or any society, any world that surely and steadily decides *not* to be like that, decides to run on lines completely opposite to what it's made for, decides to live by greed and fear and competition – well, that person, that world, can't last. You can't go on and on and on not loving – just like you can't go on and on and on not eating. You weren't made for it. Sooner or later, you'll die. In the case of love, sooner or later, you, society, the world comes to a crashing, cataclysmic end. Comes to 1914. Comes to the Somme. That's what Gore meant by divine judgement. For me, at any rate, it makes the idea a little more comprehensible.

But even if you're still at a loss, here is one simple thing you can hold onto. What's the job of a Christian, of a Church, in a world headed for judgement? Jesus puts it well: endure to the end. Don't let your love grow cold. Preach the good news of the Kingdom – the Kingdom, that is, which is not like the Kingdoms of the world. The Kingdom which is not built on fear and force and greed, with its towering buildings and opulent splendours. You are citizens of a different Kingdom, one where we don't dominate and use each other, but where we love and serve. Where our whole lives are about justice and peace and mercy. What do you do in a world under judgement? You keep the faith, you live the life. You show the whole world what it is really made for: a testimony to the nations, as Jesus says. Let God worry about exactly when and where and how the judgement will come: you, me, live the Kingdom. As we head towards Advent, let us commit ourselves anew to doing just that.