

Bedmond 19.11.17

Apocalypse, not now,

I can't help thinking that, because of the special place we give to the sayings and teachings of Jesus we do have a tendency to 'spiritualise' everything he is reported to have said and turn them into something rather more 'religious' than they might actually be. I wonder, though, is it possible that many of the things he said were actually straightforward, wise common sense?

I mean, for example, how many of us have memories of our mothers saying things like "Well, if you don't look for it you won't find it, will you?"; or "If you don't ask, you don't get!"; or, again, "Doors don't open by themselves, you know – you have to knock on them first!" Whereas when Jesus says much the same it seems to take on a more 'spiritual' tone and becomes "Seek and you will find; ask and you will receive; knock and it will be opened to you". Basic common sense becoming a spiritually meaningful set of sayings.

Or what about that almost ingrained understanding that the most important things in life are those things that money can't buy and that you're a happier person if you make such things more important to you than material possessions. We sing songs about it. Jesus puts it "Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust corrupt and thieves breakthrough and steal. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven..."

Or, again, what about "Be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves." It's common sense, the kind of common sense I would expect from a wise and sensible person who has taken up residence, as it were, as a man of the world, even though he is actually God Incarnate. That would have been good, sensible advice for several of our politicians to have taken up; being as wise as serpents seems to have taken priority over the second bit though, about being as innocent as doves.

So I've been asking myself what common sense advice Jesus appears to be giving in the passages in our Gospels that we call 'Apocalypses', an example of which we heard in today's Gospel reading.

An Apocalypse is basically a graphic and picturesque visionary idea of what things are going to be like before the end of the world, end of the age, Last Judgement, Second Coming of Christ, establishment of the Kingdom of God. The one of which we heard part is in Matthew's Gospel and is almost identical to the ones in Mark and Luke's Gospels. John's Gospel doesn't have one but there is a long, complicated and almost incomprehensible one in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. The words 'revelation' and 'apocalypse' have virtually the same meaning – an uncovering of what is otherwise hidden from most people's minds.

We only heard part of the Matthew Apocalypse, but if you read all three of them in the Gospels they are all very much the same in tone and content. They all talk of wars and rumours of wars; nation rising up against nation; famines and earthquakes; lawlessness and sacrilege; false Messiah's and false prophets; thunder and lightning; sun and moon failing to give their light – and so on. All very terrible – and all very familiar. A sobering thought is that there has never in the world's history been a time when such things have not been part and parcel of life.

Much of it was particularly evident to the Jewish people of Jesus' day. The passage we heard stemmed from the wonder and awe shown by the disciples at the sheer majesty and grandeur of the Jerusalem temple. It was huge, like nothing they would ever have seen anywhere else, constructed with quarried granite and stones so huge that three men could hardly get their arms to join around them. The gold and the white shone out to be seen from miles away and it stood out proud as the summit of a hill whose top had been dug away and flattened for the Temple to take its place as the tallest feature to be seen anywhere around. It was magnificent and they couldn't help being awestruck as they gazed at it all with their leader, Jesus. And it was that leader, Jesus, who, like most clear thinking people of his day could clearly see where it was all heading. The Jewish people had been under the occupation and rule of Imperial Rome for the best part of a century and there had been rebellion and anti-Rome militarism in the air for a very long time, much of it in the name of religion. Jesus even had at least one Zealot, Simon, amongst his closest followers and there may even have been one of the dreaded Dagger-Bearers, Siccarii, amongst the twelve, one Judas. Jesus could see without a doubt where it was all heading. "Not one stone of this will be left standing on another!" he said, no doubt with great sadness. It may seem the kind of poetic exaggeration we expect from prophetic visionaries, but it was amazingly accurate. Some thirty years after the death of Jesus the whole thing flared up into the most bloodthirsty and catastrophic rebellion and war of suppression the region had ever seen. Thousand upon thousand died as at least three crack Roman Legions were sent to settle the matter once and for all, each with orders to wipe out anything Jewish in their path. After four years of the most incredible slaughter and suffering, including an estimated million deaths from famine alone, Jerusalem was finally devastated and its Temple so thoroughly destroyed that it has never again been rebuilt. The huge stones that formed its columns and walls were systematically pulled apart and heaved into the valleys surrounding the City. They still lie there covered by the earth and growth of the centuries. What an Apocalypse!

It's this that Jesus speaks about in his Apocalypse, intermingled with equally catastrophic pictures of what we may expect to happen throughout world history as we hope, pray and work for the establishment of the Kingdom of

God. He spoke of it forty years before that cataclysmic event, Matthew wrote of it after he had seen it all happen for himself – or if not seen it, certainly been horrifically aware of it.

So what common sense teaching do I imagine Jesus would be delivering in relation to his Apocalyptic visions of the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the world events leading up to the End of the Age, the Second Coming of Christ, the Last Judgement, the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

First, don't be an Apocalypse Nerd! He said it himself – well, words to that effect. The word Nerd, of course, hadn't yet been invented. I looked it up in the dictionary. It means 'a foolish, feeble or uninteresting person!' Sadly, some of these foolish, feeble uninteresting people do get so obsessed with the whole Apocalyptic business that they ruin their own and other people's lives as they do so. There have been several examples of people falling under the spell of Apocalypse Nerds to the point of entering mass suicide pacts, climbing up mountains to wait for it all to happen – even taking it on themselves to bring it all about by imagining themselves to be agents of God as they create the very violence and suffering Jesus so much abhorred. He actually says in the part of Matthew's Apocalypse we didn't hear "If anyone says 'Look, here is the Messiah' or 'There he is!' – do not believe them."; and " About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son – only the Father" So don't be an Apocalypse Nerd.

I've seen two examples of not following that common-sense advice. One was a colleague, a local preacher who at the time of the Gulf War insisted from the pulpit that all the terrible things that were happening were all signs of the imminent coming of the Lord and were all the work of the hand of God! What kind of God was that who would deliberately arrange for the huge death and destruction of war in order to bring about the Kingdom of peace we all long for. Bad Press for God, I fear.

The second was a woman who passes frequently through the alley at the side of our house taking her children off to the school up the road. As she passed me recently she said very brightly, with a smile on her face " The Lord is coming soon, he's on his way" and carried on with her children to school. It may have sounded devout, but I do wonder how many people to whom she may have passed on the same message regard both her and the religion she represents as verging on the insane. Sadly, I have learnt since that her husband regards her as crackers and it's not helping their marriage any.

And the second common-sense teaching Jesus gives us? Use your common sense and get out of the way of trouble when you see it coming. Don't deliberately put yourself in harm's way just to demonstrate your faith and trust in God to deliver you. Or, as he himself put it, "Those in Judaea must flee to

the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat". Yes, it was Jesus who said that first, not your local Fire Safety Officer.

Good, common sense. Such a contrast to the 'Faith' story I remember being put to us in my teenage years as a member of the King's Own Bible Class. We were told of the commendable faith of the woman in London during the Blitz in 1941 who, when asked by her family to go downstairs and get into the air-raid shelter said "No. I says me prayers and I goes to sleep. There's no need for both of us to keep awake" I remember thinking at the time we were told this as something to admire – "Hang on – so what exactly was she expecting God to do? If a bomb was falling on a trajectory that would bring it through her roof and into her bedroom before exploding and blowing her to kingdom come did she expect him to deflect it so that it hit someone else's roof and killed them instead?" Not a particularly Christian approach surely? And does faith and trust expect God to suspend the natural laws of the universe that we can so confidentially build our lives around?

Putting yourself deliberately in harm's way in order to demonstrate your trust in God is not so much trusting him as putting him to the test. Don't do it. God can't win. If you're hurt, then God emerges as no longer Almighty, omnipotent. If you're not and other people are, God emerges as one who favours one over and against another. It's not a fair test and it's God who emerges as the loser. Use your common, God-given sense.

Remember that common-sense, no nonsense teaching of Jesus – "Be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves."

BH.