

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 17 November 2019 10.00am

Rev Peter Cornick

A tragic world: a faithful God

During the week, I heard one of our District Chairs, Michaela, recall a lecture she went to by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. She remembered asking him a question. She asked him, after the successes of the anti-apartheid movement, and the advances of the women's movement, in the late twentieth century, did he now think, with the situation the world is in, all we thought we had won, is lost.

Rowan Williams responded: I didn't think it was about winning; I thought it was about being faithful.

Being faithful responds to the situations of today and tries to respond in a Godlike way.

This week, the gospel reading is one of the strangest and most difficult to understand. It might seem, amidst the wars and pestilence, as if all is lost – indeed, it might seem as if following Christ, will intrinsically result in all being lost amidst suffering and tragedy. It might seem, from this gospel narrative, as if the good people are not winning. As if the gospel is in fact, not good news. The point of this complex reading is not – who's winning; it's whether God is faithful.

The setting of the gospel

It is impossible to understand this passage, without being aware of the setting in which it was written.

Verse 5 says:

21:5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he – Jesus – said.

Before going onto examine what Jesus said, stop to contemplate the temple. To admire the massive limestone structure, covered internally with gold and silver. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, it was like a snow-capped mountain. It must have been quite a sight.

But Jesus is really not impressed by such opulence. So he says:

21:6 "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

At the time of writing, Luke knows that the temple – with all its opulence, has been destroyed. The Jewish revolt against the Romans led to Jerusalem being put down in a terrible war.

21:7 They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

The year of this destruction is AD70.

So, you have to decide. Does Jesus predict the future with accuracy because he is Jesus? Or does he predict that such opulence will crumble, because historically, it always does? Or does Luke, who knows what happens, put words into Jesus' mouth for a reason?

Jesus talks of wars and insurrections in the future. It seems as if he is talking about the generality of conflict – almost its inevitability – rather than specific battles. Do you remember last week – remembrance – we were supposed to learn from the Great war; the second world war; but the awful truth is, as humans, we don't.

And so, perhaps calling to mind this inevitability – this condition of humans to war amongst themselves, Jesus calls his followers, *not [to] be terrified*. Hearing the accounts of conflict, it is hard to imagine not being terrified. But the word 'terrified' only appears elsewhere, in the NT, in Luke 24, when Jesus tells his disciples, not to be terrified

following the resurrection. So, is there a hint here, in this passage, of the suffering Jesus must undergo – the inevitability of violence against him – before his resurrection? Wars and insurrections will be part of the story, yes, but, resurrection too.

Is Luke, subtly, signposting us to the faithfulness of God. Even in the face of death, God will redeem the situation – resurrection? A tragic world, but a faithful God?

The passage gets worse. Having dealt with human made disaster, Jesus moves onto speak about earthquakes, famines and plagues; dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. These events are heralds of suffering says Jesus.

Now of course, to the ancients, such natural disasters were interpreted as signs of suffering ahead. Very real suffering for some people – as indeed is the case today when earthquake hits or famine sets in. But Jesus uses these disasters as a sign that for those that follow him, because of him, suffering will follow.

They will arrest you and persecute you. In fact, they will arrest and pursue you might be more accurate. You will be hunted down; there's no escape. You will be tried, due to belief in my name. Again, is there a hint here of the trial Jesus will experience? Is he signposting the story ahead – how he is pursued, by the temple authorities who perceive him to be a threat to their interest.

21:18 But not a hair of your head will perish.

21:19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

This passage works on several levels.

- It is a warning about disaster in general; wars, earthquakes. The message is, do not be afraid, God will redeem the situation.
- But it is also an overture to the great narrative of the passion. The suffering and death of Jesus – yet, the good news, the gospel – God will redeem him.

A tragic world; a faithful God.

So, we are aware that whether war or earthquake, we cannot ignore a tragic world. But where are the signs God is faithful today? In the last few months of 2018, Indonesia suffered several earthquakes and tsunami. Over 2000 people lost their lives and 40 000 were displaced. These events are inevitable if we live on the earth. Our planet works and maintains life precisely by being a violent molten rock. But in the face of such tragedy and suffering, it is hard to see the faithfulness of God.

It is through those who follow Christ, that we discover this faithfulness. It never was about winning: but about faithfulness to the situation in hand. The Methodist Church's emergency aid agency, All We Can, provided 'food, hygiene and sanitation equipment, cooking tools, clothing, blankets and temporary shelter supplies. Hundreds were able to receive these items.'

Faidan was six-years-old when his family were caught up in the tsunami and earthquake.

'He was fishing with his father when the tsunami happened. His father was thrown off the boat by a big wave and had to swim through it to catch the boat where Faidan was standing, terrified. For the days following the disaster, Faidan was really different from the young talkative boy the people in the village were used to. He wanted to stay alone, he was not talking to anyone.

Now, he is doing better. Children show resilience and teach us that there is always hope, even when things become really hard. Families like Faidan's received temporary shelter kits from the Methodist Church's charity, All We Can. This enabled them to create private, safe tents. It helped Faidan.

The faithfulness of those who gave to this charity, and those who worked with Faidan, have brought about resurrection, from suffering. For those terrified, Jesus says, do not be terrified – in a tragic world, God continues to be faithful.

Conclusion

The gospel passage is obscure and full of questions. Did Jesus refer to the temple itself falling, or was he being more general? But amidst the obscurity, there is a message of hope to those living in a troubled world. Despite the inevitable tragedy, and Jesus doesn't hide the fact of suffering, God is faithful. From terror, comes peace. The example from the Methodist charity, All We Can, suggests that God's faithfulness, is reflected in and enacted by, the followers of Christ.

21:18 But not a hair of your head will perish.

21:19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

It is not about winning, but about being faithful.

A tragic world: a faithful God.