

## Sermon for the 10am service on the first Sunday in Advent 29<sup>th</sup> November 2015

Jeremiah 33.14-16

Luke 21.25-36

Jesus words might have been written for now. *“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars... on the earth distress among nations...People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world...”* The nations’ distress is clear and has been clear for a long time. The jihadist war against the West, promoted by a very, very small minority of Muslims (who some Muslims refuse as Muslims), had been going on since the 1990s in Africa. But since it erupted in the Western World on 9/11 there has been almost constant war in the Middle East and Central Asia. Millions of ordinary people living in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, as well as the countries surrounding them, have been affected by the conflict. Arguments about its origin, who caused it, who is to blame, seem almost irrelevant in the face of the terror that millions endure on a daily basis. Terror that’s causing migration out of the area as people seek safety and a way out of extreme poverty. And their terror is now being imported to us. Like them, we are experiencing the profound loss of control Jesus’ words point to. Over the past couple of weeks, I have been surprised by the number of people who have told me, that after Paris they don’t feel safe in London now. They’re afraid of what might happen, so are more careful about where they sit on the tube, avoiding anyone carrying a rucksack who who looks as if they might be a Muslim. They’re aware of their prejudice, they recognize their fear is stoked by an anti-Muslim media, and they are not proud of it. But I am sure they are not alone. So I am glad that Advent is upon us once again. For Advent invites us to deal with the reality of the world as it is and yet see beyond the present. It gives us a lens through which we can see God at work when violence and terror are in the spotlight. And it assures us that God has a future for us that breaks into our present, and changes our here and now.

Today’s Gospel may well reflect something of our present–day reality, but if we’re to find help to face a terror that affects not just us but people in the Middle East, Africa and Asia as well, we need to understand what it is. It’s a passage in the apocalyptic tradition. Those who know the bible well, will recognize that it’s a patchwork of phrases from the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. And hat with them, it doesn’t seek to describe present reality, but creates an expectation that God will intervene. The language is larger than life, because apocalyptic language is used to anticipate unimaginably important events that invite us to look beyond the present, to God. That’s easier said than done ‘though. Right from the beginning of his Gospel, Luke writes, *“on that day...” “in those days...”* and *“the days are coming...”*

But in western society, most of us live as if “that day” will miss us, because most of the time we are safe and secure. Western democracies are good places to live. Mot of the time the vast majority of us have access to health care, shelter, sufficient food and so on. So we mostly live with the expectation that we will not be confronted with terror and instability. All of us nurture this illusion, and maybe it’s necessary, to some extent. But Luke’s witness to the upheaval of the world reminds us that “that day” may strike any of us and, will in fact, strike all of us. In our country, it mostly comes in the form of illness, the loss of employment, a home, or the break-down of a relationship or our mental health. Janice Jean Springer is American. She writes about the losses she experienced when she was diagnosed with

Parkinson's disease. Among them, she includes not only the physical struggle to maintain her balance, but also the erosion of her *"self-image as a strong and vibrant woman."* "Though perhaps the most painful loss of all, is the loss of her illusions. She writes, *"I've lost the illusion that I am exempt from the losses and limits that besiege other people."* I think this helps us to understand how the profound, cosmic experience of loss that Luke writes about, affects us as individuals. And if it affects those of us, who live in relatively secure nations, how much greater is the impact on those whose countries have been ravaged by war and violence.

In the midst of the rising tide of confusion and fear, Luke tells us, we are to look for a familiar face. A face we will recognize. The Son of Man. Instead of being overwhelmed by the chaos all around us, the Son of Man will appear, and we will know that the Reign of God is near. This challenges the ways we usually respond to fear and terror. Instead of being destroyed by it, we are invited to look for the Son of Man, in our midst. Probably not on a cloud, but in the ordinary, regular things of life, as leaves sprout on a tree, the things that encourage us in the ways of righteousness promised by Jeremiah. So what does this mean in practice. Let me give you three examples.

Confronted by her loss, Janice Jean Springer wondered how she could be faithful in her new circumstances. Her spiritual director suggested her experiences might be giving her life a *"contemplative shape, a deeper monastic spirit."* So she looked at daily timetable with a new set of eyes and saw something that might resemble the monastic practice of praying the hours. She says, *"I inserted the names of the hours of prayer into my daily routine of pills and naps and exercises. Now, each time I check the schedule I'm reminded that my day is permeated with prayer."* Some days it doesn't work. She'd rather enjoy a Ben and Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk ice cream than learn *"what this illness has to teach her."* But on most days, on the unfamiliar road she's now on, she's given glimpses of the God she knows, a God of love and grace, a companion who walks the road with her.

On the Sunday after the attacks in Paris, I received a letter from Donald Eadie, a retired Methodist Minister. *"To-day is Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> November"*, he wrote, *"and at 1:15 pm when the call to prayer is broadcast in the mosque in the street around the corner to where we live in Birmingham, I will join other men, men who go to our local mosque and we will take off our shoes. There will be no women present. It is two days now since the shootings in Paris. Our prayer is to the Creator, the all merciful, it is for all humanity and it is for ourselves."* The perpetrators of the events in Paris intend them to divide us from our Muslim neighbours. Yet the vast majority condemn terrorism much as the rest of us do. Donald sought to accompany them. To draw closer to them. A few days later, the Imam from the Central Mosque in London, joined us at the Marylebone Interfaith Service. He did the same. We need to maintain relationships with our Muslim neighbours. We must not succumb to fear of the other. We must make space for friendships that allow us to see righteousness in each other.

Last week, my husband Daniel, went to his class at the gym. It's a rehab class for people who have had heart attacks and over the past few years he's become friends with some. Daniel had noticed that, every week, one went to the chapel after the class. Last week, at the beginning of the class, he told Daniel that a close family friend, had been killed in Paris. At the end of the class, Daniel asked if he could go with him to the chapel, for a short silence. He accepted. Daniel stayed for 5 minutes or so and then got up to leave. His friend asked him to stay and told him the whole story.

You might have noticed the common theme in these stories. It's prayer. This is the preparation, the waiting, the alertness Jesus calls us to. Prayer, in the midst of chaos – whether it's personal or corporate - is a practice, that offers a sign of hope. In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks the truth about humanity's propensity, for war and violence. A truth that will never change because God does not prevent those who seek power from exercising power in the most inhumane of ways. Yet God still offers us the hope of seeking God's way in spite of fear and foreboding, and that hope rooted in prayer. When we make time to be in God's presence, in prayer that holds scripture and our daily reality together, and has space for silence that allows us to hear God's word to us, we learn to see the world and all God's people through Jesus' eyes. And when we can, we will see where how "*the kingdom of God is near,*" and what that is leading us to do and to be. Amen.

Sue Keegan von Allmen

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