

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 28th November 2021
Advent Sunday

Keep Alert

Within scripture, as you may expect, there are a number of genre or types of writing, one of which is apocalyptic. Apocalyptic writing includes books like Daniel, bits of Isaiah and Ezekiel.

The apocalyptic style of writing really came into its own around the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E.; some suggest in light of the rise of the Greek Empire under Alexander the Great which brought about the fall of the then known powers of Persia, Assyria and Egypt. As this happened the then known world order radically and quickly changed forever, becoming something completely alien to the experiences and understanding of the established ancient cultures of the day- almost as if a cataclysmic event had taken place and world had ceased to be with a new world order under the Hellenist rule being established.

Apocalyptic writing offered a way of expressing this profound change, with all its anxieties and fears, the overturning of the old and the establishing of the new and what it might mean for the present and future. Apocalyptic allowed writers of the time to express community fears and concerns as well as offering hope and a promise of a better future where kingdoms they had known were re-established and old glory days relived; where the previously established place of God, moved or usurped by these new ways, could be given a new place in the lives of the people.

Apocalyptic then became a useful literary tool in galvanising a broken nation, giving hope for a future where once again their hopes and expectations could be established. Through apocalyptic writing the worshipping community could rediscover or re-understand God's place in what was happening around them. The God who was once thought to have made his home in the Temple of Jerusalem had to be reimagined and freshly understood as the Temple, this impregnable divine place, was ransacked and destroyed. Apocalyptic answered the question: "How could God let this happen?"

Our gospel reading today is known as the Lucan apocalyptic. Concluding Jesus' earthly ministry and providing a backdrop to Jesus' death and resurrection, this apocalyptic gave Luke's readers, the Christians in Jerusalem, a way of understanding what was happening to them, an expectation and explanation of what was to come. When Luke writes, the Temple in Jerusalem has probably been destroyed for the third time by the Roman forces in 70 C.E. A catastrophic event for Jews and Christians alike. This force of Beelzebub, as the Roman occupying forces would have been seen, overpowering the seat of God and destroying the Holy City. What does this mean for the people of faith?

Apocalyptic writing offered an interpretation and understanding of these dreadful events to the early believer. The hope expressed as these events, along with the persecution of the faithful, offered a back drop to, in Luke's view, the immediate event of the Parousia, the second coming of Christ. Surely the world being turned on its head, the mindless persecution and martyrdom of the faithful must have a meaning or purpose in God's plan if the gospel is to be believed! They must mean, as Jesus promised, that the Christ is coming again to bring an end to all things, and that coming must be imminent.

The confidence and hope of the early church is of course doomed to disappointment, something drawn upon in 2 Peter 3.8-10: "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not

wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed." (NRSV)

As the church continued in its ministry, still looking for the coming of the Christ, it reassessed the nature of the Parousia in the full significance of God's actions in Jesus. Here for us is the difficulty with apocalyptic writing. A question re-occurs and is used as an accusation by those who reject faith or who are anti faith. If your God is real, "How could God let this happen?

As we leave church today, as we walk out of this building back into the world, we see the world carrying on about its business and its pleasures. Your friends and family may think you are odd, being a Christian and going to church -I know some of mine do. Our faith is seen as outdated, disapproving, boring and irrelevant. We are told what we need today is more money, more comfort, more parties, more revolution. And if your Jesus is so special, why if God is real, is the world in such a mess? Our critics do not know about the achievements of faith - the freeing of slaves, the rise of education, the building of hospitals. They certainly do not know about lives changed daily by the gospel. Instead, our critics want us to be like them, loaded down with the cares of life; and, as Jesus warned, with dissipation and drunkenness, both literal and metaphorical. Our critics want us to think we are odd and stupid. Similar pressures as those experienced by the Christians in Jerusalem reading Luke's gospel for the first time.

The answer then is the same for us as it was for the Christians in Jerusalem. Keep alert. This is what we are told to expect. Patience is the key (look back to 2 Peter 3). Pray for strength to keep firm in the faith. The faith Jesus calls us to is not full of excitement and rushing around, flying banners and full of adrenaline. Using N T Wright's words, faith is the steady tread of prayer and hope and scripture and the sacraments; it is the witness day by day, week by week, year by year. This is what counts; this is why patience is one of the fruits of the spirit. Yes, Luke expected the imminent arrival of the Parousia. Yes, the Holy Spirit gives us these words to ponder. And each year we stop and listen and pray in the Advent hope that Christ will come and not be slow.