

Parish of Esher  
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

## SERMON

Second Sunday before Advent, 18 November 2018

Daniel 12.1-3; Psalm 16; Mark 13.1-8

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*Nation will rise against nation. And kingdom against kingdom ... This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.*

Oh my goodness – it doesn't sound like good news as we listen to our readings this morning on this Second Sunday before Advent! And if this is just the beginning, things are likely to get worse! Nation rising against nation, and earthquakes and famines; and then we have the Book of Daniel with its 'time of trouble' and the names 'written in the book', and we're told what might happen to those whose names are not 'found written in the book'. (I'll come back to the prophet Daniel in a minute. But I promise, I'm not going to even mention Brexit along with all our other troubles!)

I suppose there's never been any time in history when there hasn't been nation rising against nation, when there haven't been earthquakes and famines. And forest fires; and massacres. We're constantly reminded how fragile life is. Disaster seems to be in a way an inevitable part of life. So how do we read the signs of the times? Is the world about to come to an end?

There are some people who see disaster as God punishing a wicked world. Some years ago, when there were bush fires devastating huge areas in New South Wales, like the dreadful ones we've just seen in California, some fundamental Christians were quite clear what these fires meant: that God was angry with the people of Victoria whose lawmakers had recently liberalised the abortion laws. Goodness knows what the fundamentalists are going to say about the Californian wildfires.

If there's any truth in what the fundamentalists say, we'd have to come to the conclusion that God is permanently angry with his people. Disasters – both natural disasters and man-made ones – are a permanent feature of our experience of the world we live in. But I don't believe for a moment that God is punishing us. The suffering of the world is not punishment by God, and I can't believe that God creates people in order to make them suffer.

So now a brief diversion into the prophet Daniel and his book in which the names are written. Some Christians will tell you that if your name isn't 'written in the book', you'll be among those who as Daniel says are destined for 'shame and everlasting contempt'. And hell fire and damnation.

I don't know how many sermons you remember. There's one that I remember well, and probably some of you remember it too: a sermon preached here in the year 2006 by our then Archdeacon. It must have been the same Sunday in the Church's year, because we had the same reading from Daniel. And Julian our then Archdeacon preached mightily about the names written in the book, and asked us if our names were written in the book; and he told us that if our names weren't written in the book we'd face everlasting damnation. And many people in the congregations here in Christ Church and at West End were very surprised at this, and actually very offended, as Julian should have known that a very different message has always been preached here.

I don't believe that God creates anyone for eternal damnation. There's enough here for a whole series of sermons, because there *is* judgment which we're all heading for – and this is the message of the New Testament just as much as the Old Testament. But I must just say here that the New Testament tells us about God's grace and forgiveness which come after judgment, and I believe that there is salvation that's offered to all of us, sinners as well as saints. So please don't let anyone tell you that your name is or isn't written indelibly in any book!

Suffering is not what God wants for us. And the suffering of the world is not God's punishment. So how do we read the signs of the times? *Is* the world about to come to an end, and God's Kingdom at last established?

John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness, said '*The Kingdom is at hand*'; and Jesus preached the same message. He showed that the Kingdom of heaven is indeed upon us, but at the same time that there's a future element: the Kingdom is being established, but it's not yet complete; and we are the agents in bringing it about. It's our task as followers of the Way to bring about the Kingdom that God intends, the reign of justice and peace, of beauty and truth, which transcend the suffering of the world.

How do our feeble and stumbling efforts help to achieve this Kingdom, we may well ask? We try, sporadically, to build up bits of the Kingdom, but again and again we fail, or so it seems. The good news of Jesus has reached every corner of the globe, but the globe doesn't seem any better for it. Even the countries where Christianity has been established for centuries seem no better than the others (or even worse).

Perhaps the trouble is we misunderstand how the Kingdom is brought about. We are told to be doers of the Word, not merely hearers, and we want to achieve by our own efforts, on our own terms. We forget that it is *faith* that will usher in the Kingdom, not works. Again and again we have to remind ourselves that from the very beginning our justification comes from faith – like the faith of Abraham, ready to set out into the unknown, ready to make the ultimate sacrifice, ready to do all for God – being justified, brought into a relationship with God: that faith didn't depend on the doing, but on readiness to respond to God's call. And in the same way the Kingdom isn't established by our doings, but by God's doing. Our task is to grasp the faith, and to work for the future – God's future. The Kingdom will be built by God's action, not ours; our task is maybe just to make the building blocks, the bricks with which the great edifice will be constructed. The brick-makers don't need to see the architect's plans to do their part, and we don't know how our bricks are going to be used. Our job is to make them well, faithfully, and our delight is perhaps to see them put into the wall, building up something that's strong, that will last, all the bricks together, bonded together in a way we could never envisage. Some of us remember when they were building Guildford cathedral, we paid our half crowns to pencil our names on a brick that was going to be used in the building. We didn't have any idea how those bricks would be used, or where

they'd find their place in the massive construction that's there today. But the bricks are there, playing their part. That's how the Kingdom of God is built, brick by brick.

And so, as we grasp God's promises that the Kingdom will come, and that we will be part of it, we're called to build *for* the Kingdom, in the faith that God will reaffirm and enhance all our present acts of kindness and justice, of beauty and integrity, our acts of peace, in the humble knowledge that God's future remains as God's gift, a future that we can't foresee.

Two weeks ago on All Saints Sunday we thought about the great Saints of Christianity, but we reminded ourselves that we too are called to be saints, the saints of God. Each of us is called to be holy; and yet each of us, every minute, falls short of that calling because we're all very much subject to sin. If we pretend that we can achieve holiness, or if we give up because we think we can never get there – either way, we miss the point. It's God who will use our feeble efforts to build up his church, to build up his kingdom.

Sin is a reality, and so is the judgement to come. That judgement will show up, and then abolish, all the injustice, untruth, all the violence and oppression, all that spoils God's intention for us and for the world.

St Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth about the foundation on which we build, namely Jesus Christ: *'Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, each one's work will become manifest, for the Day of Judgement will disclose it'*. Jesus speaks of the stone which the builders rejected which is made the cornerstone of the building. The quality and durability of our present building will only become apparent on the last day.

And so when we pray, as we do daily, *Your kingdom come*, we don't need to worry how it's going to come, or how our contribution fits in. We continue making the building blocks, and they will be made use of, and the Kingdom which we long for will come about.