

Christ Church Cathedral

Fredericton, NB

November 30, 2003 Advent 1

A Sermon by Dean Keith Joyce

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

The beginning of a new year and we hear about catastrophic destruction and huge cosmic upheaval. Fear and dread fill the air. What in the earth, literally, is happening? People can't read the signs. It's a warning that the very powers of heaven will be shaken. And into that scene we will see the Son of Man appear, coming in a cloud.

We should be able to interpret the signs. We know that when a tree begins to bud that the summer is around the corner. Likewise, Jesus is intimating, we should know the meaning of these strange signs. The meaning is that the kingdom of God is near. Indeed it is, in the living presence of the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, made real by the Holy Spirit. And there hardly has been a time when such things could not have been said about the world and this creation of God. When has the world ever known the complete absence of natural disaster, or of strange happenings in the skies?

What are we to do as we see these disturbances? Some have chosen in very misguided ways, though well meaning, to plot the date for the end of the world. They spend much time and energy trying to figure out when Jesus is going to return. And they all have been wrong, and they all will be wrong. Only God knows when the Son of Man will return. I think the attempts to target Christ's return is in some way to take control of the things of God, and in many ways, they show lack of faith and trust in God and his word.

Others naturally disregard any of this. It's thought impossible to believe such things, especially in any literal way. Yet Jesus tells us that those who have faith in him will not pass away i.e. they will continue to enjoy life with him, now and until the day of his return. That's what it means, potentially, when Jesus says, "*this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.*" When faith is placed in the Giver of Life, then the eternal life he gives will be a permanent reality in those who receive it. They will not pass away from his presence.

Such portents in the world around us are meant to draw our attention to the fact that God really is in control of this world, even when it doesn't seem like it. We don't always understand this control by God because it seems as if there is no benevolent interest in the realities of our painful world. Yet we do have hope that God does know what he is doing and that things will work out in the end. And we do know the end. Jesus will come back for the consummation of all things.

What about when our personal worlds run amuck? What about when they're torn apart by seeming cataclysmic events that affect our health or our relationships or our work? Some of you I know, in the face of such challenges, have not given up on God, knowing that somehow he still is in control, even when the signs seem to point to anything but such a reality. The cries in the night are heard by him, and the absence of clear answers stare you in the face, and while many moments of honesty before God and others are part of what you express, you don't give up.

Somewhere into all of this the Son of Man is coming. The kingdom of God is at hand, his love is known and the trust is there that somehow in the midst of it all, his loving purpose is being carried out.

So often his methods, and what he allows to happen, are beyond our knowing and understanding. It doesn't mean we don't have questions, or that we don't wonder, or even doubt, sometimes, that God is still around and interested. Yet the choice is there: do we run in fear and dejection or do we sit up with hope, knowing that Jesus will return because God is in control, and because we know he is here now through his Holy Spirit? When our hope is in him our hope is in the One who is eternal. His promises are not passing things, just for a season. Even while "*heaven and earth will pass away, [his] word will not pass away.*"

Anticipating the return of Christ, and being aware of events that can prompt that awareness, remind us that this world is not just for us as individuals. It's not just for "me." It can help us remember that we are part of something much bigger which is the work of God to redeem this world, to draw all people into his love, to be nurtured by his grace and sustained by his hope.

The context for our lives and for all that happens in this world and that happens to us as individuals is not merely the years we spend on planet earth. The true context is eternity, an eternity in the presence and service of God. Everything that takes place, and which directly affects us, can be used by God to draw us closer to him, to open our eyes to the world beyond our limited vision, to deepen our trust in him and his ways.

As we enter this new year, let us enlarge our vision of God, let us desire that impossible thing which only he can do in us and through us so that we are filled with hope, and so that God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit is glorified, and the kingdom of his love and grace is expanded beyond even our greatest imagining.

We have much to be thankful for; we have much to look forward to as the expression of the loving heart of God is worked out in this world, his world.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.