

*Advent Sunday 2012*

Anyone who believes that the gospels are inerrant and can be taken literally will have a bit of a problem with today's gospel.

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

That generation did pass away, and the second coming has not yet happened.

Does that mean we throw away the gospel? Of course not.

Does it mean that this particular passage has nothing to teach us? Absolutely not.

It does mean that we cannot have a simplistic approach. Any text that is 2000 years old is going to require us to think and work. Often, we will never be certain that we fully understand what the author meant. Sometimes we will find inconsistencies or even inaccuracies. When we are talking about the bible, the word of God, we have two strands to consider, what the author meant and what the Holy Spirit can reveal to us. These are not always one and the same, and whilst that is especially true when we are talking about Old Testament prophecies, it is also true of parts of the New Testament too.

Did Jesus mean this literally? I think Luke believed so, but we can never know the answer to that. What we can do is prayerfully reflect upon the passage and ask for guidance in interpreting it for our own generation.

By the time that Luke was writing, we know from the Acts of the apostles that there were turbulent and dangerous times. The church was expanding, Paul (and indeed Peter) were travelling, taking long and dangerous voyages. As the church expanded, it faced persecution. In Rome, under Nero, where according to tradition both Paul and Peter were put to death, and under later emperors, many Christians were put imprisoned or killed. But the church also faced conflict from within. There were jealousies, disagreements over doctrine, over who held the 'truth', who rightly understood God's will about circumcision, or food laws, or whether the church needed to be centred upon Jerusalem, or whether gentiles could celebrate the Eucharist with non-gentiles and whether gentiles

could become leaders in the church. (Thank goodness they didn't have an electronic voting system requiring a two-thirds majority, or we would all have to be Jewish Christians.)

During these early years, many Christians died, some in the most vile and terrifying ways. For them and for their families, it must have seemed like the end of all their hopes and dreams. The world may not have come to an end, but their world did. And as they crossed that invisible border between this world and the next, did they see the Son of Man? Did they find themselves standing in front of the One who was, and is and is to come? Did they have to give an account of themselves?

When someone dies, whether this is today, or 2000 years ago, they pass beyond the constraints of time into God's kingdom, into eternity. Time, the date in history, ceases to matter.

Jesus is undoubtedly talking about his kingdom, he is talking about death, and he is talking about the trials that are to be endured before death. These are eternal truths, necessary for every generation, and before each generation passes away it needs to learn the signs .

**Jesus says: Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.**

For we are all weighed down – perhaps not with dissipation and drunkenness - but with worries. Which of us here is without any worries?

In our thirties and forties we worry about being made redundant, about not being able to have children, about not coping with our children, about the fun and joy having gone out of our relationships, or about our children being unhappy at school. Later we worry because our children can't find a job, or they are living with someone that we feel might not right for them, or we worry about our parents becoming forgetful or frail. Older still and we continue to worry about our children (no-one tells you when you first have children that this is a life-long worry), we worry for our husband or wife who is unwell, we worry about whether we should get care and how we will afford it, we worry that it will use up the money we hoped to give our children and so on and so on.

And that is just when the going is reasonably good. Imagine the worries if you live in Syria, or Gaza.

We can't eliminate the worries, but we can stop ourselves being weighed down by them. For when all our energy is focussed on our own concerns, we look inwards, the world closes in, and the Son of Man might come in all his glory and we wouldn't even notice.

So, in this season of Advent, and indeed in every season, we need to be on our guard by being watchful. We need to look outwards not inwards, to help others even when we cannot help ourselves, to rejoice in the young shoots on the trees and the signs of summer coming near, even when we know that this means that our own time on earth is nearing its end. For when we see the signs of God's kingdom here, in the beauty of an unfurling leaf, in the kindness of friend or stranger, in the joy of worshipping together, we will know that we are watching, looking outwards.

This is in fact the prayer of St Paul to the church in Thessalonica:

**And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and  
for all**

May that be our prayer and the prayer for this church, for our fractured and confused Church of England, and for the whole Church, in its many denominations, that hurt and broken it may still demonstrate the love of Christ.

Amen.