

The Second Sunday before Advent – 2019 *Year C 330T*

The great 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard gives us a modern parable of a theatre where a wonderful entertainment is taking place. Each act is more marvellous than the previous one, until it happens that a fire starts offstage. The clown comes out to tell the audience. They think it is a joke and applaud. He tells them again, and they become yet more enthused. One can imagine the clown feverishly imploring them to leave the burning building, whilst they continually applaud. At last he can do no more. The fire races through the whole building engulfing the fun-loving audience with it. 'And so,' concludes Kierkegaard, 'will our age, I sometimes think, go down in fiery destruction to the applause of a crowded house of cheering spectators who think it is all a joke.'¹

Well now, despite my well-known love of disaster movies (!), I don't want you to imagine that you are in for a doom-fest this morning. Each of the three readings is visionary in its own way; from the stubble-burning of Malachi, Paul's urging us to continually work towards the Kingdom life, and finally the call of Jesus for each of us to be signs and pointers towards a transformed world. Each is about change.

The image of the Temple and its magnificence will have been an earthshattering reminder to the first hearers of the Gospel message of the way in which even the most seemingly permanent features of life have an ephemeral quality in the scale of history. Imagine St Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, or even our own beloved church in ruins; cast down - not one stone left upon another. This is exactly what happened to the great Temple of Herod in 70AD, some years before Luke wrote his Gospel. Not one stone left on top of another – the great blocks of Temple stone still remain where they were cast down over the Western Wall on the 9th of Av – Tish B'Av- a date engraved on Jewish memory and commemorated every year.

Temple imagery is central to Luke's Gospel account from the birth narratives onwards, because only in as much as he wants to lead us on a journey to consider faith. Stone is also a running theme, and it is no mistake that in the previous chapter Jesus asks a question of the chief priests, scribes and elders at the Temple: *'What does this text mean: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (Luke 20: 17)*. No wonder they can't answer him. Then we have this powerful passage today. This wonderful building – dedicated to God, filled with holy things – beautiful beyond measure. *'Not one stone will be left on another stone; all will be thrown down.'*

Change. When we look at the world, things are changing all the time; sometimes much too fast for our liking. The world is changing, the Church is changing, and so are we. Sometimes this will deeply unsettle us, particularly when it directly affects us. The loss of a loved one, the breakdown of a relationship, the realisation of an addiction or even the fragility of our own mortality – all signs of change.

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*

Most of the time we would prefer life to remain static. We tend to think of our lives as temples of permanence. It is certainly true that for many, life seems to have long stretches where things seem to be pretty constant, but such temples of permanence can turn out to be illusory.

We have only to look at society to know other temples are falling all of the time. Look at different bodies we have grown up with which we once considered temples of permanence: the banking sector, the political world, Royal Mail, British Airways, the Police Force, BBC, the job market; you name it, we have seen change of a dramatic and unsettling kind in recent years in every aspect of society. We wonder which temple will fall next. Peace, security and diplomacy seem to have given way to violence, fear and terrorism. *'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven,'* says the Lord.

But Jesus calls us to know the steadfastness of God's Love for us. He leads us to consider how we might respond to that question: *'What **does** this text mean: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"?'* Jesus uses a quote from Psalm 118² to point out he is the chief corner stone **not** of some kind of resuscitated Temple worship. No. He calls us to know that we are EACH new and living temples of the Holy Spirit of which Jesus is the chief cornerstone. As temples, we are called to know that the constant in our journey – the only immovable part of our temple - is God's Love for us made known in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. Our faith draws us to know that change, even painful change, enriches who we are. This is true living - the Good News - which we are called to proclaim with every fibre of our being, knowing that we will be strengthened in doing so. Jesus says to each of us, *'I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.'* Jesus challenges each one of us to allow the Holy Spirit to work within us on our journey of faith. In doing so we are living, breathing, constantly changing temples of God within the heart of our humanity.

I was driving to Worth on Friday, and beyond Balcombe (actually, the Cowdray Arms!) is that wonderful stretch of beech trees before you cross over the A23. Even on a damp, dreary day it was so beautiful. The ravishing colours of Autumn; great trees with their stretching branches, falling leaves, with the dark green of yews and firs here and there. Nature teaches us about change. Within a few weeks the beeches will stand bereft of leaves until Spring brings new growth. Our faith is the same – growing, changing, yet secure in the knowledge that we are called to reveal Jesus Christ to the world in whatever way we can. In this Paul encourages us: *Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.*

Jesus calls us to endure in this task. In doing so, 'all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.' (2 Corinthians 3: 18)

To him be the glory forever.

² Psalm 118: 21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.²² The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. ²³ This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.



Malachi 4: 1-2a

4 ^[a] See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.

2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13

⁶ Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹ This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. ¹¹ For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. ¹² Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³ Brothers and sisters do not be weary in doing what is right.

Luke 21: 5-19

⁵ When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶ 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

⁷ They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?'

⁸ And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them.

⁹ 'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' ¹⁰ Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹ there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

¹² 'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³ This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴ So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; ¹⁵ for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your souls.

