

Sermon for the Second Sunday before Advent (Safeguarding Sunday)

In the name of God Creator Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen.

The day will come when not one stone will be left upon another

It's a pretty bleak picture that Jesus paints in today's gospel.

Beginning with his prediction that the beautiful temple in Jerusalem will be thrown down he goes on to locate that destruction in the context of a much wider landscape of catastrophe; wars and insurrections, earthquakes and famines, false messiahs and persecutions.

Looking at the news we might be tempted to think that perhaps the time he was predicting has come perilously close. There's plenty of evidence of 'nation rising against nation' and those heart-breaking pictures of the devastation in Gaza bear eloquent testimony to the idea that 'not one stone will be left upon another'.

But of course, down the ages there has been similar speculation that the end is nigh and in fact Jesus was not making a prediction about events millennia in the future – he was speaking of his own day; of the dangers that lay just around the corner and the consequences of those situations for those who were his followers. He was all too well-aware of the perils they faced – and not surprisingly because at this point in the Gospel story he is himself facing a relentless barrage of criticism and a series of attempts to catch him out and undermine his message. In fact, this teaching comes days after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem – his enemies are closing in, and his arrest is just around the corner.

But even if we must take care how we treat such prophetic passages (and we've been reading the Book of Revelation at Evensong recently and the perils of trying to apply the dark sayings in that extraordinary book to the present day are well known) even so, there are things we really do need to take note or be alert to. We need to read the signs of our times.

In particular we need to avoid complacency.

As a Church we have recently learnt the perils of complacency in the area of safeguarding, and on this Safeguarding Sunday we must renew our commitment to addressing past failures and take seriously our responsibilities for protecting all God's children.

When we look beyond the church the call to avoid complacency may seem unnecessary when we are so painfully aware of just how 'out-of-joint' our society seems to be and yet I guess most of us, rather like Jesus' followers admiring the Temple all those years ago, rather take for granted some of the stability we enjoy, the beauty of our Cathedral, the continuation of a stable democracy, the relative peacefulness of our society, notwithstanding the occasional outbreak of violence or disorder. Those things, like the recent knife attack on the train, are so shocking because they are still relatively rare – the exception to the rule.

But we need to be vigilant. Not vigilantes, taking the law into our own hands, but active participants in civil society.

The Church of England speaks of five marks of mission. Among them are:

To respond to human need by loving service

To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation

Well the Cathedral is committed to supporting the well-being of our city, and as the prophet Jeremiah wrote, "seek the welfare of the city for in its welfare will you find your own" and there are many ways that connection can become a reality. Many of you are actively involved in support of the Food Bank, the Soup Kitchen or the Community Support Hub run by our neighbours at St John's Church. As an institution we are actively involved in a range of city initiatives such as the Council for Voluntary Service, encouraging volunteering and getting people involved in their communities. We are also members of Peterborough Citizens, that draws together groups from many different sectors: schools, colleges, churches, mosques, charities and unions, empowering communities to hold politicians and decision makers to account on issues such as housing, transport or mental health provision. One of its real achievements is giving young people a voice – and it's something we as a church might seek to learn from. And as we know well – all of us are committed to the call to protect the innocent and to safeguard the vulnerable.

Another Mark of mission, the fifth is this:

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

It seems that even now many people take for granted the climate and the predictability of the natural world. Jesus mentioned earthquakes and plagues; but the sort of man-made climate change that is affecting us now has emerged over the past two centuries of industrialisation and rapid population growth and is as unpredictable in its consequences as any earthquake. Despite the scientific consensus and the mounting evidence of its impact, it seems this 'inconvenient truth' as former US Vice president Al Gore called it, almost 20 years ago, remains inconvenient to many who make money out of the status quo.

What had been a consensus for change is being increasingly portrayed as ‘damaging to the economy’ or ‘bad for jobs’. Whether it’s a case of ‘drill baby drill’, or the call to abandon net zero targets; apparently we find it hard to bear too much reality. We should pray that the current Cop30 conference, will fulfil some of the hopes that have been invested in it.

And we need not be seduced by those false messiahs (and there’s quite a few around) peddling populist short term, simple solutions, saying it’s all too hard, when the long-term consequences of climate change will be even harder to bear and more expensive to mitigate. We only need to look at the hurricanes and floods, the droughts and wildfires, the melting glaciers and intense heat waves to see what’s happening – that is if we have eyes to see.

Those of us who call themselves Christians care about justice because we are called to protect the vulnerable and to love our neighbours as ourselves; we care about creation because we believe it to be God’s gift to us, not to exploit and exhaust but to treasure and conserve. As Christians, Jesus invites us to take a stand for the dignity of humanity, and all created in God’s image and to uphold the beauty of the earth and wonderful complexity of the world. As a Cathedral community we may need to re-commit ourselves to these priorities, while never being blind to our own blindness.

This path can be unpopular - hard truths are hard to hear – but Jesus promises to be with us, to offer us words and wisdom and to uphold us, even in the face of the hate and fear of others. Pray we and all we love might be delivered from evil – but whatever happens, to endure and gain our very souls.

Amen.