

Service 17th November 2024

Prayers of Approach

We come to you, indestructible God,
to pray for our world,
to praise you with one voice,
to hear your words of wisdom,
to entrust our nation to your love,
to encourage one another to grow in faith.
In Jesus we come and pray and rejoice,
to your glory.

Lord of all the world,
with you beside us,
we cannot be shaken.
Guided by your wisdom,
we will not be afraid.
With your path before us,
we will walk in hope.
With you as our God,
we will rejoice.

God of our muddle and our mess,
in you we find wholeness,
in you we can trust,
and to you we commit our world
and our lives today.
Amen.

Hymn Praise my soul the king of heaven (R&S 104)

Readings: Daniel 12:1-3
Hebrews 10:11-25
Mark 13:1-8

Introduction

Sometimes it's hard to find a path through troubling times, and we often flounder in the face of real difficulty. But what we are going through has almost certainly been experienced before, and there is much that we can learn from those who have gone before us that can sustain us and give us hope until the light appears once more.

The Book of Daniel was written during a period of severe tribulation – probably when the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem and provoked the Maccabean revolt – but the events it describes are set much earlier, during the time of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC. And those were certainly difficult times. Hebrews too

was written in difficult times when those loyal to Jesus are ostracised by the synagogue community and subjected to violence, but they are offered hope through 'the new and living way' which is the self-offering of Jesus that inaugurated the new covenant, promised by the prophets and sealed by his blood.

This is all reinforced by our gospel reading in which in response to a disciple's admiration of the Temple, Jesus predicts its complete destruction, but rather than be overwhelmed by what must take place, we're told not to be alarmed – just as joy comes following the pain of childbirth, these earthly pains hold the promise of God's kingdom to come.

Hymn The day of the Lord shall come, as prophets have told (R&S 637)

Sermon

People had become used to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was enormous. It was an important part of their lives. And it had been there for a long time. But, not many years after Jesus said, 'not one stone will be left here upon another', it was completely destroyed. Some of those who heard Jesus would have lived to see it. And what a shock it must have been. Something they relied on, that was always there, was no longer. What might happen, if some of the things we rely on or take for granted were no longer there? We like to believe that we can know what is going to happen in the future – we plan and we predict – but it is not always possible. The world is full of uncertainties, and things happen (good and not so good) suddenly and without warning.

Our readings from Daniel and Mark's gospel offer prophecies about what is to come and Hebrews reminds the people of past prophecies but they all also speak of the present. That might prompt us to ask, what is prophecy? One popular idea is that prophecy is all about predicting the future. In the Bible, although there may sometimes be an element of that, it is much more about speaking the word of God to the world. Apocalyptic writing, such as in Daniel and Mark (and, of course, also in Revelation), is one form of prophetic revelation sometimes used by people to try to predict the future. But, given what prophecy really is, might such an approach limit our understanding of Scripture?

All that we can really be sure of is that the future is uncertain. The people to whom all of today's passages were addressed lived in difficult and troubled times and we might be justified in drawing parallels with our own world (if not our personal experience). We see images daily on our TV screens of violence and destruction, homes, schools, hospitals, churches and once magnificent buildings in ruins. The Temple of Jesus' day was one such magnificent building, the third on the site it was the most imposing of all and even though the previous temples had been destroyed it was unthinkable that this greatest one of all could be too.

The temple was enormous. It was surrounded by a retaining wall which enclosed the whole of the top of the temple mount within which were colonnades and porticos and succeeding courtyards – the court of the gentiles, the court of the women, the court of the Israelites (adult male Jews) in the middle of which was the court of the priests containing the sacrificial altar and the temple itself within which was the 'holy of holies', the most holy place, which a priest would enter only once a year. It was covered in fine carvings, cedar panelling and beaten gold and jewels. The foundations were stones 37 feet long, 18 feet wide and 12 feet thick, which would be difficult to move even with modern machinery. It is no wonder that people thought it was indestructible, yet as Jesus warned the Temple did fall, and in their lifetime too, in AD 70, but it was not the end. Things simply changed.

For the new Christians, the Temple became redundant when Jesus was crucified and rose again. The practice of Judaism changed and evolved. Change is uncomfortable, painful but if we endure, we gain more than we lose. So where do we look for reassurance in times of trouble? Daniel, Mark and Hebrews all offer passages in which the faithful are being assured that they will be saved from the trouble ahead, no matter how bleak it looks. Whose voice do we listen to in our troubled times? How can we set our anxieties aside and trust in God?

Hymn I the Lord of sea and sky (MP 857) or Through all the changing scenes of life (R&S 685)

Prayers of Intercession

We praise you, Lord Jesus,
that in turmoil and in trouble, we can trust you.

For you are the peace beyond war,
the hope beyond despair,
the light beyond darkness,
the stability amid chaos.
Your love is indestructible and eternal;
it surrounds us, day by day.
Be our strength and our Saviour as we bring
before you our concerns for the world.

We pray for leaders everywhere:
for the leaders of the world's most powerful nations...
for the leaders of the poorest nations...
for the leaders of our own nation...
for the leaders of our churches...
May they be blessed with wisdom, humility and compassion.

We pray for those entrusted with great responsibilities:
in hospitals...in schools...in care homes...
May they be blessed with wisdom, humility and compassion.

We pray for those who influence and inspire others:
pop stars...actors...sports men and women...writers...artists...storytellers...
May they be blessed with wisdom, humility and compassion.

And we pray for one another and for ourselves,
that as we live out our lives,
we too may be blessed with wisdom, humility and compassion.
Amen.

Hymn Thy kingdom come, O God (R&S 638)

Blessing

May we shine like the stars in heaven.
Guide others in the true path,
Be wise and understanding,
Support one another,
and stand firm, in the midst of turmoil.
In the name and strength of Jesus.

And may the blessing of God,
Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer,
Rest on us, now and always.

Amen.

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