

Hope - Reflection

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

The Temple of Jerusalem was a magnificent place. Its great renovation took almost seventy years to complete, and would have been an imposing structure for all who saw it. Erected on a hill and including buildings that were far taller than even the most significant palaces of the day, this was a temple that would be visible to everyone in Jerusalem. It would also be seen by those approaching the city from quite a distance. Everyone coming to Jerusalem, even coming for the first time, would know the temple as soon as it was in sight.

Today's reading from Matthew is in a chapter that has quite a bit to say about the temple, though we do not hear that portion. Instead, we hear about the return of Christ. It is important to remember that Matthew links these two events, not in an antisemitic way, but rather as commentary on the Jewish leadership of his day. You see, the community to whom this was written were a weird little group within the wider Jewish faith.

In the early days of Christianity, Judaism was not codified. Even what was considered scripture – the writings important enough to be read in the Synagogue – was still rather flexible and broader than our current Old Testament, which is the same as today's Hebrew scriptures. However, in the days of Matthew's community, this was rapidly changing.

You see, only a year or two after Herod's temple was finally finished, the first Roman-Jewish war broke out. This rebellion started as a series of skirmishes and culminated in the siege of Jerusalem. In 70CE the siege ended and the Temple was destroyed. The magnificent temple, started by Herod and only recently finished, was burnt to the ground. This meant the community were faced with the challenge of learning how to understand their faith when the structures that had sustained it were wiped out.

And so, we get to today's reading.

Although the community were unlikely to have experienced the destruction of Jerusalem first-hand, these were troubling times. They felt like the end of the world. Some of those who were literate in the Hebrew Scriptures were probably pointing to relevant parts of Daniel and Isaiah and claiming this was it. We know from historical accounts there were others who claimed to be the Messiah, and particularly in those circumstances there would have been people who believed them. Certainly, among early Christians there was the expectation that Christ would return and the end of all things would happen within their generation.

In our generation, most of us no longer take these texts with quite the same level of literalness as the first generation did. Indeed, if we look back through history, we see the frequent repetition of Christians who thought they were facing the end of the world – the fall of Rome, a year without summer, the plague, world wars, covid... for so many people, each of these events were seen as heralding the end of the world. And in one way, it did. Each of these events was the end of the world as we know it.

As with the generation who lived in the aftermath of the siege of Jerusalem, as with each generation since who have faced major challenges in their social or political life, so too we have faced events that have meant our world has utterly changed. We too hear that call to watchfulness and are invited to reflect on what it means in our lives. The old has been destroyed, but something new will be built.

We have heard a bit about what comes before this reading; after it we have two parables on watchfulness. However, the final story in this monologue is that of the sheep and the goats and in that, we hear some of what this watchfulness means.

It would be easy, as people in almost every generation of Christianity, to retreat from the world to prepare for a coming end, but that is not what is meant here and the final parable communicates this clearly. You see, what separates the sheep from the goats is not the question of if they had the "right" faith, or if they had engaged in the "right" prayer practices, attended church, or other such actions. They are not even required to recognise the face of the wounded Christ in the people around them. All they are asked to do is live out the reign of God in their part of the world. And so we hear those lines:

Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

Are we ready to help Christ, regardless of whether or not we recognise him in the face of those whom we encounter?

When we think of the verses in today's reading, we are given a challenge and a hope. The challenge is to think about what it means to live our lives as if the end of this age was just around the corner. This is not a call to live in fear and trepidation, but in preparedness and willingness to face something new. That certainly can be challenging for all of us!

And the hope? That this, that what we know and experience now, is not all there is; that there is a sense of something more. That all our hurts and struggles can be transformed into something new and beautiful. This is the Easter story – a story of resurrection after pain – and a story of transformation in our lives and our society.

As we approach Christmas and reflect on hope, may you experience the transformation of the Gospel story in your life and in your community.