

St. Pauls Ground Zero 2006

It's a great privilege to be with you this morning and to be invited by Stuart to preach. I met Stuart earlier this year when we made a very special pilgrimage to Israel, Palestine and Jordan. I particularly remember us slipping away from the one incredibly long-winded tour guide we had to endure at Petra and climbing the cliffs there together for the wonderful view. Boring tour guides have their uses, it would seem. I bring you greetings from my own parish of Sanderstead in Surrey, just on the edge of London and from the Bishop of Southwark. At a time of challenge and great difficulty in the Anglican Communion, these informal opportunities to share in fellowship have great significance, for they make it harder for those who threaten to tear the fabric of our fellowship apart, to do so. Relationship brings commitment.

So may I speak in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

One of the jokes about the relationship between American and British people is that we're two peoples divided by a common language. If I walked on the pavement in Manhattan, I'd probably get run down by a truck. If you drove your car on the pavement in London, you'd probably put dozens of pedestrians in hospital. The word means different things in American and British English. So sometimes we have to translate to help each other understand. If you want to make your priest laugh, ask him to tell you about the word 'urinal' after the service is over.

Two peoples divided by a common language. If it's hard sometimes for Americans and Brits to communicate, then understanding passages like the ones we've heard this morning as our readings is a dozen times more difficult. With all their talk about times and seasons, with obscure references to the 'abomination that causes desolation' and with visions that quite frankly baffle us.

Travelling in a foreign country is sometimes helped by a phrase book, so that we can at least communicate. But the way these passages communicate isn't just about the words and the language that's used. The very concepts and ideas of these readings are incredibly difficult to understand because they come from a time, a culture and way of seeing things that is a world away from our own. But these passages, which are often

called 'apocalyptic' passages because they claim to reveal things that are hidden, I think they are hugely important for Christians to understand in our own time. And they're important because they tell us something central to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in a world that we often feel is out of control, beyond our ability to deal with, which often threatens to overwhelm us with its complexities and sometimes is sheer darkness.

Put very simply, these passages tell us a radical piece of gospel, of good news: they tell us that in the midst of all the struggle, God remains God. And they encourage those who hear them to remain faithful to this God is God even when it appears that the world has gone mad.

The way in to understanding these difficult passages is to start with something we all know, probably: America's most popular family. Not George and Laura, nor even Bill and Hillary. Rather, Homer and Marge. I love the Simpsons. And I'm sure many of you do. I watch them on TV at home quite a lot. They are so well-observed. But, in most shows, there's usually some point when I don't get it, when I don't understand the reference. In making so many great comments on human nature, the Simpsons sometimes have to make references which you will get because your Americans, which we Brits won't get because we don't know the background.

It's the same with these passages like Daniel 12 and Mark 13. We don't get the cultural references while those who first heard them did, because they knew what the writers were referring to. We can, if we so choose, improve our chances of understanding the passages through careful scripture study, because many of the points that Daniel and Mark refer to scripture passages from the Old Testament and from the books of the Apocrypha. It's an encouragement to us to take Scripture study seriously because our reading of the Bible will help us to understand these difficult passages much better. In our age, when these sorts of passages seem to be claimed by the TV evangelists and the fundamentalists, with their promises of the Second Coming of Christ before the end of the latest season of *Desperate Housewives* (how awful would that be?!), careful reading of scripture and a true appreciation of these hard passages will lead us in a very different direction, a direction which will help us

not to prepare for the end of history, but will help us to live out the Gospel today in a world where suffering, the diminishment of human dignity and oppression often rule. Such a world was the world of the authors of Daniel and Mark. They lived in times when oppression and hardship were the order of the day. Two centuries before Christ the book of Daniel emerges to encourage Jews to remain faithful to God in a time when pagan empires and idolatry held sway over Jerusalem. Thirty or forty years after the resurrection, Mark writes his Gospel (I think) partly to encourage the believers in Galilee to remain faithful to the values of Jesus, when war erupts between the brutal Roman Empire and many of the Jews of the day. Both the passages we heard read today, imply a time of war and oppression in which cruel empires and violence threaten faithful believers.

War and conflict has habit of turning people into the simplistic categories of ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’. In such a time, when people are often suspicious of their neighbours, people often are very guarded in what they say. So perhaps a way of seeing the difficult language of these passages is as a sort of ‘code’ in and through which faithful believers can communicate and understand one another. In the Daniel passages, references to certain numbers of days point to such communication. In both passages, this strange reference to ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ point to some dreadful sacrilegious act by the pagan empire of a historical which desecrated the Temple. Through such ideas, the authors remind their hearers of historical events which they would know about. It’s a way of saying: you know how bad these pagan empires were, you know how God has set his face against them, you know that he will, in time, not tolerate such desecration, such sacrilege, such violence, such inhumanity. It’s a way of saying: keep to the values of God, keep following the way of Jesus while all around are capitulating to the empire, keep the faith. Hold on, ‘cause God still holds the last card.

So these passages are all about keeping faith in Christ when empires threaten with their violent, militaristic and domineering ways. It’s summed up quite neatly in a verse of a well-known hymn, *The Day Thou Gavest Lord is Ended*:

So be it, Lord, thy throne shall never, like earth’s proud empires, pass away;
Thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever, till all thy creatures own thy sway.

And they connect with us because...

Well, we know all about empire don't we? Global conglomerates, powerful media, a reliance upon military power, and so on and so on. Such empires sit alongside the old-fashioned empires of national power, of which (to be honest) only one truly remains. And, just like those believers in the second century BC and in the early years of the Christian faith, we often wonder if faith can survive? Won't we all, in the end, capitulate to these vast powers that, despite their great potential to do good, can destroy and overwhelm? What can I do? I can't take on the conglomerates – I still have to shop at their stores, still have to drink their coffee, still have to eat their burgers, still have to buy their gas. I can't take on the media – I still rely on them for my information and I can't discover the world without them. I can't take on the army – I have to pay my taxes. And I can't take on this empire of national power – I can't return my passport. We're part of the whole web of empire. Each one of us. Aren't we all trapped? What good can faith do?

The people who first received the story of Daniel and the story of Jesus according to Mark must have thought similar things in the face of the empires of their day. For us, as Christians, Mark seems to imply that in his dark apocalypse of dreadful events. Even some of the faithful will lead people into the ways of empire – “false Christs and false prophets will appear...to deceive the elect. Be on your guard...” But what these authors offer us, and through them what God offers us, is something that the empires of our world would love to colonise, but which in God's strength and with God's vision, cannot be colonised. And that is the imagination that comes from faith. For us believers in Christ, faith gives us a way of seeing the world that enables us to imagine possibilities that empire cannot overcome. And when disciples of Jesus see such possibilities, we can find the strength to resist the power of empire and the ability to act as holy revolutionaries of the Gospel. Holy revolutionaries of love. That's what the writers of these apocalypses want of their hearers - to have the imagination that will give the strength of faith to resist.

To give but one example. The phrase ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ which I’ve obviously been pondering this week, has constantly raised one image in my mind that Stuart and I witnessed in Palestine earlier this year, and of which most of us will be familiar. And that is the wall that the Israeli Government is erecting around many Palestinian communities. Surrounded by this appalling concrete barrier, these communities are suffering appallingly. Many Palestinian Christians are leaving, vast numbers – Christian and Muslim – see nothing but a hopeless future. In that environment, which many of us can barely imagine, faith must falter. And yet, imaginative faith persists. A thriving Arts and Community Centre in Bethlehem and a maternity hospital down the road which battles on fired with the compassionate imagination of faith. And others have joined them in solidarity. Christian ministers from the World Council of Churches stand at barriers and checkpoints to monitor and record incidents of abuse and victimisation, again inspired by imaginative faith which refuses to be cowed by empire, despite the risks. Empire may have its walls, its barriers and its elaborate justifications, but it never has the imaginative hearts of the faithful.

We’re not surrounded by such an obvious sign of empire. Such visible signs often make things easier for they focus response. The empires we face are more insidious and many have good to offer as well as threat. But the Gospel gives us a vision of the way God’s world should be ordered, a picture of the kingdom where justice and peace reign as we shall celebrate on the Feast of Christ the King next Sunday. The Scriptures we have heard today provide a warning, a wake-up call and a strategy for standing up to the destruction of empire. And this eucharist, in which we shall share, provides alongside the Scriptures, a visible powerful demonstration of the fundamental truth we have reflected upon today: that God has not finished with his world and in Jesus he continues to offer us himself to live faithful revolutionary lives.

God give us imaginative, faithful, revolutionary hearts. Some words from a contemporary hymn:

Lord God, in Christ you set us free your life to live, your joy to share:

Give us the Spirit’s liberty to turn from guilt and dull despair,

And offer all that faith can do while love is making all things new.

Amen.