

## Luke 21:25-36

This season of Advent is all about hope, but I have a confession to make: by nature I am a pessimist. Something happens and my mind races on ahead to determine the worst possible outcome, and before I know it, I have convinced myself that this terrible outcome is almost certainly going to take place. But thankfully, only a fraction of what I imagine ever actually takes place!

One piece of advice my mother gave me was to expect the worst but hope for the best. I've never had any trouble with the expecting the worst part, but what about hoping for the best? And, as a Christian, what is it that I should hope for anyway?

A vague hope that things will somehow get better is really just optimism. Christian hope is deeper and surer than that because it rests on Christ himself.

And boy, do we need hope! As you will be well aware, we are facing some serious threats: coronavirus of course, the effects of climate change, rising poverty and the list goes on. What is the Christian message of hope when, rather than pulling together to face these issues, humanity seems to be pulling apart?

There is some comfort for us in our Gospel reading today, not least because we see that this urgent need for rescue is nothing new. In this passage, Jesus both prepares his disciples for a time of crisis and offers them hope.

It starts with a terrifying prophesy known as the mini apocalypse, which is also found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark.:

*There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup> People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*

Some believe this refers to the events surrounding the siege of Jerusalem in AD70, when the Romans reduced the great city of Jerusalem to rubble, including their beloved Temple. This must have been incredibly traumatic for the people of Israel, the very heart of their national identity was ripped out and crushed. And even worse, they probably saw this as judgement from God.

Signs in the sun, moon and stars are thought to represent kingdoms going through turmoil, and indeed in AD68, after emperor Nero's suicide there was a year of civil war and four emperors in rapid succession. There were widespread disturbances in Rome and the provinces.

All this must have been frightening to live through, it must have felt like God wasn't in control anymore, that he had given up on his people. And yet Jesus goes on to say:

*“Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

Jesus reassures them that there is no need to fear, even in the midst of tempestuous times Christ, the son of man, is with us, history is going somewhere, and the destination is Christ himself. He tells them that their *redemption is drawing near*.

Of course, the destruction of Jerusalem is not the only event in human history to have felt like the end of the world, I imagine that for those concerned the Rwandan genocide and the rule of the Khmer Rouge must have felt like that too, and then there’s the Black Death and two world wars. Reading the news at the moment sometimes feels like we too are facing the end of the world, or at least a period of terrible disruption.

The passage describes Creation, our source of physical stability, our very reality, being shaken to the core. We read of the roaring of sea and waves – and find an echo in recent floodings and other (un)natural disasters.

Jesus says that people will faint from fear and foreboding, and indeed, a recent survey carried out by the Global Future thinktank found that 78% of people reported some level of eco-anxiety – that is, fear of environmental damage or ecological disaster.

This passage is apocalyptic. Which means that it gives a "vision of heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities". It encourages us to see beyond the political, social, and even environmental troubles of our times, in hope and trust that the son of man, Christ himself, will come and bring redemption.

And so, this Advent, we watch and wait for a child to be born. One who will bring justice and peace, who will heal the rift between Mankind and God. The Christ child who will renew and restore all things, even our damaged home planet.

And Christ has come. He showed us that a life lived in union with God is characterized by forgiveness, love, reconciliation, justice, healing, and peace. But this glorious vision of life lived with God is alien to this world, and so the powers that be put him to death on a cross. But death could not hold him and three days later he rose again, defeating the power of death and giving us hope for the restoration not only of our own lives but also of the whole of creation.

Advent reminds us that Christ has come, and that Christ will come again.

We get some hints about the future God has planned for the world elsewhere in Scripture. In his letter to the Romans, Paul describes the world as suffering from labour pains as it waits to be set free from its bondage to decay. There is a vision of this future hope in the book of Revelation. Let me read you a few snippets from chapter 21:

*Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, ... God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with*

*them. ...<sup>4</sup> 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Although we don't know how or when this promise will be fulfilled, we know that all will ultimately be well in his new creation. In the meantime, we ask God to help us trust him in our unknowing.

How should this hope of the future new creation shape our lives now? Well, in this passage, Jesus' gives us some instruction on how to approach life: he tells us not to let our hearts be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and worries.

Dissipation means wasting your life, instead we are invited to make the most of the life we have been given.

Avoiding drunkenness is the challenge to live life fully aware instead of blotting out our painful feelings with alcohol, drugs, or binging on Netflix!

By avoiding worries, Jesus is encouraging us to not be paralysed by our fears.

All in all, this is a call to be alert and ready to engage with life rather than to withdraw, avoid, and worry. God will give us the strength to face reality and be engaged in transforming the world in whatever ways he calls us to, motivated by the hope we have in Christ.

And if you feel like your hope is fading, I encourage you to meditate on passages such as Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21 that describe this vision of the future.

Matthew's gospel tells us that we are the light of the world, so perhaps we can think of ourselves as mirrors reflecting back into the world the light of that future new creation.

We live in the present as we will live in that future, and that means caring for each other, protecting the planet, loving our enemies, seeking justice and generally living the values that characterise the future we hope for. We live for Christ until, in the words of John Pritchard, 'our hesitant lights are absorbed into God's greater light'.

Christ stood with his disciples in the face of the mini apocalypse of AD70 and so if we feel overwhelmed by anxiety, or the struggles of life, we know that Christ stands with us too. *We can stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.*

Once again, as at this time every year, we wait for the coming of the Christ child who is the saviour of the world. We also wait with hope for the fulfilment of this salvation in the new creation. As we wait, we are called to live in God's future now. Perhaps this Advent is a good time to ponder how we, like mirrors, might reflect back a little more of that future hope into our corner of the world.