

‘Straighten up, raise you heads, you redemption is near...’

Sermon at Holy Trinity Utrecht (pulpit swop), 2nd Sunday in Advent, Dec 2016. Passage – Luke 21:25-33.

Opening Prayer:

Lord, may these spoken words, be faithful to the written word, and they lead to us to the living Word, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”
(28).

Jesus speaks in the few days before his crucifixion. He had prophesied about the destruction of the temple, and then he concentrates much more on events occurring in the future. Jesus shares of false Messiahs, of natural disasters and wars – but the end will not immediately follow those events. As this year draws to a close, Jesus words: nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom - we have seen a very disturbed year and we are unsure what lays ahead. Terrorism in European, Brexit, an unexpected and also unpredictable new American President elected, the ongoing conflicts in Iraq against Isis, and in Syria, Europe struggling in his heart and approach to refugees. Jesus said we would hear of wars and tumults but the end will not immediately follow; he goes on to share that even before these times of unrest, he says that persecution will come to the believers – some of which will include betrayal by kin, trials before the powerful, and for some it will mean death yet for all *“not a hair on your head ill perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.”* I attended a conference in Utrecht last month with 7000

for the organisation Open Doors, which was founded seeking to strengthen and support those believers experiencing persecution for Christ. Its existence and the stories shared and the prayer resources remind us of those who choose to follow Christ and who this year, or this week even, may be betrayed or rejected by family or who may be brought before the powerful and influential and asked to explain why they have rejected the national faith and turned to Christ... and for some this month this year will be their last - yet Christ says, not a hair on their heads will perish... as John 10 says of the Protection of Christ for the believer:

“My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand. My father who has given them to me, is greater than all. No one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

Their bodies may perish but they will remain in the hand of Jesus and the Father.

Jesus then brings his disciples back to the city in which they stand, and prophesies of its coming destruction, a brutal and awful time to come – a time which did come in AD70 through the Roman armies. All these events, Jesus shares will happen yet he goes on to point to another time... But before we move to that...

We see already signs that Jesus spoken of have happened and are happening in our world. Just as if an outside visited the Netherlands, they could see the signs of Sinterklaas coming (tomorrow) – shoes by chimneys, songs sung, Sinterklaas journal

– by what is happening they know he is coming. Jesus says there are signs which point to his coming. These past and present events in our world give us confidence that as Jesus prophesied those events, it confirms that the future ones still to come, will come, and with it, the return of the Son of Man. It also confirms that even in such difficult times, that the Lord remains in sovereign control for he stated that these would come to the world and to his followers. As he says, his words are more stable than heaven and earth. Theologian John Calvin suggests that another reason Jesus shares what he does, is to keep them from falling away. He suggests the early church may have read the OT about the Kingdom of God coming and saw it only as success after success and so would not understand particularly why believers were being killed, the nations were not flooding to Jerusalem yet to worship, and that sin, the devil still caused harm. Jesus teaches them so they don't see the troubles and problems as something to cause them to doubt. They learn the kingdom certainly has come – in an initial present phase but there was still to be a consummation, set to come phase. That they and we live in the inbetween times – the kingdom here but not yet. Jesus words reassure them.

Jesus moves to a more distant future. *“Now when these things begin to take place.”* A time of cosmic signs – it echoes words in Joel 2

“the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the LORD.”

Such fear it will create in people – *“people fainting with fear and forboding of what is coming on the world.”* Creation will be in convulsions. People feeling trapped, tormented, like someone

hyperventilating due to anxiety. These are the final times. Jesus says that this generation will not pass away until all this has taken place – the generation who sees the start of these cosmic events, will also see the end of them when the Son of Man comes with power and great glory...

But while the world is in fear and trauma, the Christian is to be different. While everyone is fainting, shaking their heads in confusion, Jesus uses some beautiful images: “straighten up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” At university I was part of an improvised drama group, and we were once asked to help out the Roman Catholic society at Uni with a murder mystery party – they to be the guests, we the actors. Myself and a few friends attended the planning meeting. I came in with a plan and it all looked fun. But it quickly became clear this society leaders had a whole different plan. My friend Paul said, we were all talking in this flat, as it got more difficult he saw me first go from standing casually chatting, to leading against a wall, to sliding down the wall, until I agreed to their plan...a sign of defeat! And here, Jesus asks for the reverse...do not be defeated by what happens around you or by how people respond. Stand, straighten, look up. This is the confidence he says Christians can show in those final days. As someone said: *“As the world shrinks back in fear, the saints will look up in expectation.”*

‘Straighten up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

He says look up, for your redemption is coming. Redemption as phrase used to set someone from slavery. The image that the return of Christ brings freedom. How we can look forward to

that glorious day – when justice and righteousness finally are established, the kingdom of God finally comes. And we cannot lose sight of this direction the Lord is taking his world and universe in. In the film, Wall-E, an animated film I watched with my two children last week, humanity has had to leave the Planet Earth due to the rubbish which has built up. They now live on a spaceship, with the plan they would return. But 700 years go by before Earth can be inhabited again – a fact revealed by a plant discovered by the robot Wall-E. They have forgotten what the original vision was for being on the space ship – a temporary home before returning to their true home.

It is possible to forget the vision God has for his universe and world, because it has been so long since it was first shared. Redemption. The two themes in Scripture which connect to this appear to be mortality puts on immortality – and when death is defeated – as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15. When the redemption of the body takes place – as Paul says in Romans 8. But also freedom from the miseries stated by Jesus earlier – persecution, misery caused by war – we only need to watch images from Aleppo or Iraq what war does.. At the Open Doors Conference we heard a pastor from Lebanon share, Lebanon has 4 ½ million people and has taken in 1 million refugees from Syria and Iraq. Redemption – freedom. Death defeated, sin removed, devil departed, the kingdom of God fully come to earth. Freedom.

So what is our attitude? There is a pattern of events described many of which are occurring and have occurred. But others have yet to occur. However Jesus does not give a calendar ...and in other well known places Jesus says he will come like a thief in the night, sudden, unexpected, so for every generation, the call

is to keep watch, to be alert. Jesus teaches his followers to be end time minded but to remain actively involved in ministry, rather than withdrawing assuming now is the time. In one way, we are to assume that the Son of Man is at the door, but we don't know exactly when he will come in.

“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

I'd suggest we can claim this verse: as we see these signs of our age happening, we don't become beaten down, sliding down that wall, but we straighten we stand, and we look up – look up knowing Jesus promised these would come, and so they occur within our Master's will and his protection, and so as these came true his other promises about a glorious day of his return when he will light up the sky as lightning, will come true. And we look forward to it, for redemption, freedom from what enslaves us, chiefly from death, sin and devil.

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Closing Prayer

Father in heaven,
who sent your Son to redeem the world
and will send him again to be our judge:
give us grace so to imitate him
in the humility and purity of his first coming
that, when he comes again,
we may be ready to greet him
with joyful love and firm faith;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.