

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 18 October 2009, Kilcalmonell, linked with Killean and Kilchenzie

20th Sunday after Pentecost

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'Be still' (CH 189)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'If you believe and I believe' (CH 771)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

We gather in this church today
and we bring our world with us:
its history and humanity,
the good and the bad,
the joy and the sorrow,
all that has been part of life
ever since people live on earth.
And we bring it before you, O God.

We gather in this church today
and we pray for this world of ours:
for all the dark pages in our history,
for all the times humanity is violated,
for the good we did not notice,
for the bad we just allowed,
for the joy we turned into sorrow,
for the life that could not flourish.
And we bring it before you, O God.

And now as Jesus taught us, we pray:
Our Father...
...Amen.

Readings : Isaiah 29:18-24 (*Good News Bible*) & Matthew 24:3-31 (*new translation*¹)

¹ This is based on the work of F.H. Breukelman, *Bijbelse theologie. I,1 Schrift-lezing*. Een verhandeling over de kolometrische weergave van bijbelse teksten als hulp bij het lezen en als grondslag voor de exegese (Kampen: Kok, 1980) – probably a good reason to learn Dutch. Some information about colometry, as distinguished from stichometry, in classical texts was already in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th Edition (1910 pass.), now on [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org). More can be found in: Bruce M. Metzger, *Manuscripts Of The Greek Bible. An Introduction to Greek Palæography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), which is on [Google Books](http://www.google.com/books) now.

[Matthew 24:3-31:]

3 As he sits on the Mount of Olives the followers come to him on their own,
saying,

Say to us when this will be
and what will be the sign of your presence and the end of time?

4a And Jesus answers them,
saying:



4b See to it that no-one leads you astray;
5 for many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ',
and they will lead many astray,
6 and you will begin to hear of wars and rumours² of wars.

See to it that you are not alarmed, for this has to happen,
but it is not yet the end.

7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom,
and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places,
8 but all this is just the beginning of the birth pains.

9 Then they will hand you over to oppression and they will kill you,
and you will be hated by all the nations because of my name;

10 and then many will stumble,
and hand over each other and hate each other;

11 and many false prophets will stand up
and lead many astray;

12 and because of the increase of lawlessness,
the love of many will grow cold;

13 but the one who endures till the end will be saved.

14 And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed
throughout the whole inhabited earth
as a testimony to all the nations –
and then the end will come.



15 Therefore, whenever you see *the abomination of desolation*,
according to the word of Daniel the prophet,
standing in the holy place

– let the reader understand –

16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains;

17 let the one who is on the housetop not go down
to take away what is in his house,

18 and let the one who is in the field not turn back
to take away his cloak;

19 woe to those who are pregnant

and to those who are breast-feeding in these days;

20 but pray

that your flight may not happen in the stormy season
and not on a sabbath.

[= Dan. 9:17; 11:31]

² Or: hearings.

21 For there will be a great oppression,
such as never has been from the beginning of the universe till now,
and never ever will be;
22 and if these days would not be cut short,
no-one of flesh and blood would be saved;
but because of the chosen ones these days will be cut short.

❖

23 Whenever then someone says to you,
‘Look! here is the Christ’, or, ‘Here!’,
do not believe [it].
24 For false christs and false prophets will stand up
and give great signs and wonders,
so as to lead astray, if possible, even the chosen ones;
25 look! I say it to you beforehand.
26 Therefore, when they say to you,
‘Look! He is in the desert’,
do not go out,
[or] ‘Look! In the inner room’,
do not believe [it].
27 For as the lightning comes out from the east
and shines as far as the west,
so will be the presence of the son of man;
28 wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.
29 But immediately after the oppression of these days
the sun will be darkened, [= Isa. 13:10]
and the moon will not give its glow,
and the stars will fall from heaven,
and the powers of the heavens will shake.
30 And then the sign of the son of man will shine in heaven,
and then the tribes of the earth will mourn,
and they will see
the son of man coming in the clouds of heaven, [= Dan. 7:13f]
with much power and glory.
31 And he will send his messengers with a great [sound of a] trumpet,
and they will gather his chosen ones from the four winds,
from the farthest boundary of heaven to the other.



Hymn : ‘Lift up your hearts’ (CH 518)

Sermon

A jolly cheerful piece of Gospel we have read today. Apocalypse all around. It may seem as if this is not really Gospel, because it does not fit in with our pictures of a nice and gentle Lord Jesus bringing peace and harmony everywhere. But texts like these may also frighten us, because, since they are Word of God, they must happen some time, isn't it? According to Matthew Jesus is linking his words directly to the apocalyptic visions of Daniel – and these indeed *are* about the end of the world as we know it. As

C.S. Lewis once said, this is “the most embarrassing verse in the Bible”.³

Let me be clear: Jesus’ words are certainly *not* intended to frighten or scare people, but rather to encourage and support, even to comfort them. It may help to read them alongside the words of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah may seem to speak of apocalypse, but actually he is not. Isaiah’s message is for all of it primarily a message of strong hope.

Visions of doom, apocalypse or judgement day express the dark side of our human consciousness. The side we don’t like to see. But inevitably we will have to face it some day. It emerges whenever we find ourselves in deepest despair: when jobs or income disappear, when soldiers have to go into battle, when relationships break up, when loved ones die, when our children suffer and struggle. In days like that everybody looks like an enemy, friends fail or betray us, the world goes mad and without any doubt the monsters are out everywhere.

We don’t like to face this. At the same time we have all watched films like *The Seventh Seal*, *Apocalypse Now* or *Armageddon*,⁴ which all rely heavily on the apocalyptic metaphors in the book of Revelation. Perhaps it’s more a matter of having to look than actually liking it, but still the fact stands that these movies picture our deepest fears: relentless death, devastating war, cosmic disaster. So there is a good reason why we don’t like it – but still want to watch.

Rather than neglecting these fears, we should fully accept they are there, and actually do something about it. Because fear, and its counterpart aggression, cannot be neglected. If we try to lock them away in a distant corner of our consciousness, they will find their own byways to fester a way out, often in disguise. It will eat us from the inside.

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So what to do about our fear that all things in life will be ultimately in vain and doomed? That will differ from one person to another, but there is, I believe, one general rule for everyone: *do not read Bible texts about apocalypse or final judgement literally – never ever.*

Daniel is the one in the Old Testament who has given us these kind of visions. In the Christian Bible he is counted among the prophets, but in Jewish tradition he certainly is not. The difference between Daniel and the prophets is, that Daniel literally applies his visions to history. Things will literally happen as he sees it, that’s the message. The prophets were far more flexible and metaphorical in their visions and words.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The World’s Last Night And Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960).

⁴ [*The Seventh Seal*](#) (1957, Ingmar Bergman), [*Apocalypse Now*](#) (1979, Francis Ford Coppola) and [*Armageddon*](#) (1998, Michael Bay) all have their own take on apocalypics, the first more psychological, the second both physical and philosophical, the third more Disney bombast, but all picture our dark side equally strong, I think.

From the start the rabbis have been very careful about anything apocalyptic. In the days of Jesus, one century later and at several times in Jewish history there have been people who presented themselves as the Messiah, claiming that they would bring the end of the world – and never ever were they right. From a rabbinic point of view Daniel is very much on the edge of being biblical.

In the Eastern Orthodox churches – the vast number of Christians in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East – the take on the subject has always been metaphorical or allegorical, but not literal. Instead of expecting a second coming of Christ, they emphasised that our current state of life, bound to decay and sin, is in desperate need of transformation. And that will not come through historic events, but by the Spirit of God and through Christ who is alive on earth. All these wonderful icons they painted only want to do one thing: to offer those who look piously a true glimpse of the glory that will be revealed in creation through this spiritual transformation.

(So when Ronald Reagan said that Armageddon was near, no single Russian leader will have worried about it.)⁵

Both Jewish and Eastern Orthodox tradition teach us that taking apocalyptic texts literally is dangerous and actually leads you away from the true message. But how to find that message?

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As I said, it helps to read Jesus' words alongside Isaiah. Isaiah has but one theme: the people will be saved by God, even after all the oppression and aggression they had to endure. The prophet's message is one of indestructible hope, and all judgement in his words is pointing at the destructors and oppressors.

What Jesus really said and how his words were edited or adapted by Matthew, we will never know. But it is clear that the message is aiming at a young church that found itself in dire straits: rejected by the Jewish leadership, persecuted by the Roman empire. Jesus' words are a source of comfort and hope to them.

If we read carefully we will see that the message is not about destruction and doom, but about salvation. The chosen ones – those who chose to follow Jesus – will be saved. In the end God's glory will be revealed through the presence of the living Christ among his people. The Word from the beginning⁶ and the original blessing⁷ will overcome all doom and gloom. In the end there will not be anything great or mighty or frightful, no, in the end all will see the *son of man*. That is a Hebrew way of saying, translated into Greek, which just means: the human being as God intended it to be in creation. But! – and that is something the Eastern churches understood better than the Western – that is a matter of faith coming true, rather than a case of historic facts.

⁵ Reagan actually wrote that in his personal diary the day Israel bombed a nuclear reactor in Iraq, 7 June 1981.)

⁶ John 1:1f.

⁷ Genesis 1:1-2:4.

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Now we need to add one more thing. The ancient church clearly expected Jesus to return in their days. An apocalyptic dream indeed, we should admit. But that just did not happen. From that the church in the East has quickly learned that this is a spiritual matter, while in the West we had more of a struggle in finding our own balance between the spiritual and the material. In the West matter does matter.

It is a mistake to assume that spiritual truth will eventually fully materialise, and become a historic fact. Thinking so leads to all these horrific announcements of the end of history, Armageddon, apocalypse and so on.

Instead we should try to find our own icons of God's glory revealed among the people. We might find one in the beauty of nature. Or in the love between partners. Or in learning what it means to be a band of brothers. Or in the wonder of the cosmos as science explores it. Or in the unexpected event where former enemies start to work together. Seeing God's glory is a matter of faith, but it works in and through the nitty gritty of creation.

In the end there will not be an inverted Big Bang, or a total wasteland, or a unprecedented world-wide killing. In the end there will be a human being, *son of man*. In faith we know he is already among us. Because Christ is alive. If we dare to live as his followers, we might even become wee icons of him. So the last word is: hope, deeply rooted hope.

Amen.

Hymn : 'Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire' (CH 598)

Offering and Dedication

Prayer of Intercession

Lord of the Ages, God of humankind,
in prayer we remember
our fear, our horror, our anger
when we look at this world and those who dwell in it.
The doomsday speeches we have to endure,
about this earth and its resources
being turned into desolate wasteland;
about the young generation
who will not have any future;
about politicians who only care for
their own power, glory and wealth;
about criminality flooding our country;
about wars and rumours of wars,
of natural disasters and the threat of even bigger ones.

It seems only natural
that our world is going to end in sheer disaster.
There is a lot to be afraid of.

Yet you are the Lord of the Ages,
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob –
not a god of hell and damnation.
Therefore,
even if we gravely damage our earth,
even if young people have a very rough start,
even if we cannot blindly trust our leaders,
even if crime and terror are a threat,
even if we cannot stop making war,
feed us on hope, pure and simple hope,
so that we will not be only terrified
and sit like rabbits caught in headlights,
but instead dare to proclaim the love of Christ,
the fellowship of all humankind,
and the wisdom of your holy Spirit.
Make us work on anything we can do to turn the tide,
from changing our lightbulbs to building green energy plants,
from learning to hold our own anger to ending wars.
Teach us, O God, the power of hope.

In silence we remember those we know
who need us to remember them.
(silence)

So we pray,
in the name of Jesus Christ,
son of man forever.
Amen.

Closing Hymn : 'Christ be beside me' (CH 577)

Blessing