

North Kildonan United Church

28th November 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Luke 21: 25-36

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

The Royal Mile in Edinburgh runs from the castle at one end to the Palace of Holyroodhouse at the other end. Holyroodhouse is the Queen's official Scottish residence and beside it stands Holyrood Abbey. The Abbey played a significant role in Scottish history for many centuries, but in the 1600s Protestant violence turned the once grand Augustinian abbey into a ruin, which is how it stands today.

Some of the walls of the ancient abbey remain standing, and within the abbey, some of its area has been turned into a cemetery. One tombstone in particular caught my eye when I visited there in 1995. The text carved on it read in part:

"Here lies the body of Thomas Lowes, Esq, Late of Ridley Hall, in the county of Northumberland. One instance among thousands of the uncertainty of human life and the instability of earthly possession and enjoyments.

Born to ample property he for several years experienced a distressing reverse of fortune and no sooner was he restored to his former affluence than it pleased Divine Providence to withdraw this, together with his life.

READER. Be thou taught by this to seek those riches which never can fail and those pleasures which are at God's right hand for evermore. The gracious gift of God and to be enjoyed through faith in JESUS CHRIST, our Saviour."

It continues: *"An only daughter over whom the deceased had long watched with tenderest care..."* at this point the rest of the inscription is almost impossible to read. This tombstone was well over 200 years old and the effects of weather and vegetation had obliterated at least a third of the inscription.

What strikes me most about this tombstone is the honest depiction of this man's life. He was born into plenty, plunged into poverty, and just when he was re-establishing himself, his life ended. Not the stuff of Hollywood movies, where everyone lives happily ever after. But perhaps the stuff of real life.

And it is to our real life that the word of God speaks.

Recently I was watching a YouTube programme on the Holocaust. A number of survivors of Buchenwald Concentration Camp were being interviewed about their last days before liberation. One man said at 3 o'clock in the afternoon of April 11th, 1945, two American soldiers walked into his barracks. He said: "the Messiah just arrived." Actually more than one person being interviewed regarded the American soldiers as the Messiah, their Messiah, their saviour from the absolute depths of hell.

Today's gospel, the gospel of Luke, was written around 85 AD, which puts it about 15 years after the tumult of the Jewish war against Rome. That war was very destructive to the Jewish people on so many levels, and it must have seemed like the end of the world was near. We had a reading from Mark's gospel a few weeks ago that had a similar theme.

We know that life at times seems like total chaos. The opening words of today's gospel speak of a chaotic situation, no doubt affected by, and containing echoes of, the Jewish war. Later generations reading these words would also find them as an apt description of what they were going through, be it wars or natural disasters. We just have to put on the news to see the chaos British Columbia is suffering through right now, a chaos that is also beginning on the East Coast.

But this gospel reading is about hope, even in the face of chaos. These chaotic times come, but then they also go. And we live through the chaos.

I remember hearing a sermon once given by a priest who was also epidemiologist. You know what an epidemiologist is? They study diseases, how diseases and epidemics develop and spread and are treated. My apologies to any epidemiologists here if my description has sold short your profession. The important thing he said was that all epidemics, all viruses and plagues, eventually end. I don't remember when I heard the sermon but I'm guessing it was back in the dire days of AIDS, when treatment was at times crude and the drug regimens brutal, all the while providing little promise to those infected. In a nutshell he was saying, hang in there, all these viruses that threaten life will eventually lose their power and end. No doubt he would say the same thing to us this day about COVID if he was still alive.

In his commentary on today's gospel, Tom Wright invites to imagine we are living in a part of the Roman Empire at the time of the Jewish war, say around January AD 69. We are hearing wild rumours of the siege of Jerusalem, of the death of Emperor Nero and now the death of his successor. It seems like a civil war is just about to erupt. Everything we take for granted is now suddenly in question. How can we even talk about this new reality?

Assuming we are Christians, we might use the language we heard earlier, descriptions of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear, and so on. Now we aren't afraid of the sea and the waves but we use this language because nothing else will do. And since we are Christians, we draw on the language of Scripture: "the Son of Man coming in a cloud."

We hang onto the promise that the Son of Man, that Jesus is with us in this trying time because we have nothing else.

Now let's imagine it's twenty years later. The crisis has passed. Jerusalem is in ruins, Rome has a new emperor and we are reflecting on what has happened and what hasn't happened. The Church is better established now, but the society around us is still

the same old, same old way. Wickedness has not been conquered but we try to live as Jesus taught us.

But things feel a bit different now. We still hold to the promises and warnings Jesus gave us but living after what we thought was the end has provided us with a deeper understanding of what Jesus was trying to tell us.

Maybe Jesus is not coming back quite so soon, maybe our message needs to develop, maybe creating a new world begins with our actions and attitudes, not with looking into the skies to be rescued but looking with compassion into the eyes of our sisters and brothers in need.

That realization holds true to this day. Here we are, 2,000 years later, living between the promise of the birth of our Saviour and the promise of his return. We live in this in-between time, between memory and hope as some call it, seeking to be faithful disciples. At the same time, we look with contrition at the destructive ways we have harmed God's creation, endangered the delicate balance of nature and ignored the warnings of climate change. But just as our ancestors in the faith did not give up when all the world seemed to be in chaos, everything lost, we do not give up, or ignore our calling to love and care for the world and for everything that is within it.

So since we are in for the long haul, then maybe we should do what we can to set right what has gone wrong. The opportunities continually present themselves to us, opportunities to serve, to care, to put love into action.

Benjamin Mays, a civil rights leader in the United States, is often quoted as saying:

*"I have only just a minute,
Only 60 seconds in it. . . .
Didn't seek it, didn't choose it.
But it's up to me
to use it. . . .
Just a tiny little minute,
but eternity is in it."*

We are at the First Sunday of Advent, a time of waiting for the birth of our Saviour at Christmas, but on a deeper level a time of waiting for the second coming of Christ to set everything right once again. We wait patiently and eagerly for that day, but until that time comes, we live in faith, embracing all signs of hope and doing all that we can to bring those signs of hope to a community and a world at times full of despair.

In Edinburgh stands another monument, not to the past like that tombstone, but to the future, a monument that speaks of the advent hope. It is a statue of an African mother and child, the child partially hiding in the mother's skirt, and the inscription reads: "*Woman and Child. Erected by the City of Edinburgh District Council. To honour all those killed or imprisoned for their stand against apartheid. Unveiled 22nd July 1986.*" And then in bold letters the final line reads VICTORY IS CERTAIN.

As the prophet Jeremiah says to us in our first lesson: *“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”* Amen.