

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Luke 21: 25-36

“Reconstructing the Present to Allow New Life to Break Out”

1. The horror and terror of the death and defeat of Jewish people when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem is only 10 years old at the time of Luke's writing.

And so Luke uses the words from Psalm 65, words that Jesus may or may not have used, to express the memory of terror: 21:25: “upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity”.

In the Lukan passage we heard this morning, many images of horror and terror are taken from Jewish tradition, OT, psalms, Exodus, Daniel, and so on: images which spoke of the history of suffering of this people. Luke realises that human suffering stretches from the Ancients to his time. It is global, universal.

2. To people facing horror and terror, and particularly the Jews who experienced the great disaster of the fall of Jerusalem, Luke says: “stand up and lift up your heads”. Why? Because God promises to draw near to humanity, especially in their times of suffering, especially near to the poor.

This drawing near creates freedom and liberation, a key theme in Luke's Gospel. In the first chapters, God responds to the longing and hope, of Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Anna. Their faith is an expectant one! Their faith is an advent faith, expecting and preparing for the promise of future life-giving events, such as the birth of Jesus.

3. The image “stand up and lift your head” is not just positive thinking. Actually, it is irrational in the face of present reality. As Paul Ricoeur explains, it is hope as an a-logical stance in life.

"hope begins as 'a-logical'. It effects an irruption into a closed order; it opens up a career for existence and history. Passion for the possible, mission and exodus, denial of the reality of death, response of superabundance of meaning to the abundance of non-sense - these are so many signs of the new creation whose novelty catches us, in the strict sense, unawares."
(The Conflict of Interpretations, p. 411)

As Walter Wink suggests, Luke is not just presenting imagery about the end of the world, using apocalyptic language, which abandons hope and looks for divine, miraculous intervention. Luke “regards the future as open, undetermined and capable of being changed if people alter their behaviour in time...” (Apocalypse Now? Walter Wink; www.christiancentury.org). That is, such imagery is a call to hope, reflection, and preparing for courageous action for self and social transcendence.

Actually, such an act breaks us out of contained and normal responses to distressing and awful events. Normally, we look down, we respond with strong emotions or are frozen in them.

And this Advent season is a call for us to stand up and lift up our heads as we face our own little

deaths and challenges, as I said a few weeks ago: challenges that may be personal, relational, familial, church, national or global. Certainly, the climate change issue is one of our greatest challenges.

4. Yet, Luke tells us that standing up and raising our heads is only a beginning of an expectant advent stance. We are to stand and raise our heads in preparation for new ways of thinking, being and acting because our redemption is drawing near. Our redemption means for Luke freedom and liberation.

Advent invites us to be open to new life in our midst. This means, Luke tells us, to look for signs of new life within our life and life around us. This requires being on guard, so our heart does not become overwhelmed with those things, which will stop our freedom and liberty, of our own self, our family, our church and our society. Luke's Jesus says, be alert, pray that you can recognise and learn about those things that stop new life!

5. In her insightful article, *Advent speaks to the power of smallness*, Sister Joan Chittister writes that Christmas swallows up Advent:

Advent is about the spirituality of emptiness, of enough-ness, of stripped-down fullness of soul. Advent points to the essentials of life; commercial Christmas points to its superfluities. Advent comes to trigger consciousness, not to provoke our consciences.

The Talmud teaches that every person should wear a jacket with two pockets. In the one pocket, the rabbis say, there should be a note that reads, "I am a worm and not completely human." And in the second pocket, the rabbis say, the note must read, "For me the universe was made."

The story is clear: The function of Lent is to remind us who we are - and who we are not. The function of Advent, on the other hand, is to remind us who God is and who we are meant to be, as well. Advent is about the riches of emptiness

Joan Chittister makes a good beginning by describing Advent as a time to trigger our consciousness. Yet, we need to release that for the ancient Hebrews, being a worm was not a psychological sense of worthlessness. It is about human finitude! And it is about the unfinished nature of being human! It is about openness to the future and new possibilities, and this could even be a third pocket!

To this I would add, a different sense of consciousness develops only by intentional looking at others and ourselves awry, by looking from a place that is not the usual place of seeing. It requires being alert, seeing what we usually don't like to see about ourselves or others.

Luke's Jesus invites us to look and see what is going on: that is, to learn about ourselves and life; and then to recognise the signs of new life - the branches sprout leaves, imagine what emerges from this, the summer is arriving - we look honestly at our lives, we may discover our unhealthy dependency or control of others, we learn what has created this dependency by learning about its causes ... then we can reimagine a new way of relating to others.

Otherwise, we may find ourselves hurtling along in our Christmas focussed, consumer-driven life, without consciousness or conscience. Like the men who go fishing in the movie *Jindabyne*, who, when they come across a tragedy that needs immediate attention, set it aside for the weekend so

they can have their fishing holiday.

Conclusion

This is the Western, middle class syndrome: setting aside the wider world, the environment, global horrors of poverty and the environment while we can continue with our lifestyle and small concerns.

Faith lives from the power of the hope of the future drawing near to us. But a future that begins in our faith in this coming Christ, as the present Spirit of Christ lures us from the future into the reconstruction of a present self and life to allow new life and freedom to emerge.