

Woodstock, 18.11.18

Daniel 12.1–3, Hebrews 10.11–25, Mark 13.1–8

Well, that was an interesting set of readings. You'll find that I usually stick to the lectionary readings when preparing worship, and that's for three reasons. Firstly I think it helps us keep a discipline in our worship so we don't always stick to our favourite themes. Secondly, we can be reminded that we are not an independent local church but part of a much wider church. The Methodist Church is bigger than us, and we are part of that bigger church. And, of course, the Church is bigger than the Methodist Church (and I don't just mean that St Mary Mag's is bigger than this building), and we are part of that bigger church too. Many other local churches, within and beyond Methodism, use this or a similar lectionary and so we can share our thoughts with our fellow Christians in many other places. The third reason why I tend to stick to the lectionary most Sundays is that if I didn't I'd just have to think of something else to do instead.

But when this weird stuff comes round I do wonder.

Those verses from Daniel come at the end of several chapters of weird stuff. That's a technical term in Biblical studies. Or at least it should be. There are several chapters of this weird apocalyptic writing. And Daniel's a strange book. It's written in two different languages, there are quite different versions of it and it has different focuses. In Jewish scriptures it's found with the category of the writings but in our Bible it's in with the prophets. But in all of that confusion there seems to be a message of encouragement to hold firm in times of trouble and oppression.

Apocalyptic is a style of writing which arose towards the end of what we might call the Old Testament period amid some great struggles for the Jewish people. It was a way of tying in the troubles they were undergoing with a faith that ultimately all will be well in God. It's written as if it was foretelling the future but is usually at least in part a writing about the past and the present *as if* it was looking forward into the future, and the meaning of the text is probably a more general meaning rather than, as some people have tried to work out, some precise prediction about the end of the world or something equally calamitous. Apparently, according to one writer for example, the book of Daniel predicts the second coming of Christ in the late 1980s, provoked at least in part by what is now the European Union. I'll leave it to your judgment whether Brexit really is the end of the world, but that's probably not what the biblical text was originally about.

It all seems very strange to us, but Daniel draws to a close with this reference to resurrection, which is unusual for the Hebrew scriptures. Resurrection seems to be an

idea which only developed late in that Old Testament period, but here it is: *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.* For those whose lives under oppression had precious little hope, here was an ultimate hope. Even death will not be victorious. Like apocalyptic writing, it's exciting, it's strange, it's special.

In the New Testament, apocalyptic writing is an important background to the texts we have. The most obvious example is the book of Revelation, which draws very heavily indeed on the book of Daniel. But Mark chapter 13 is another place where this kind of writing can be found and, indeed, later in the chapter, even referencing Daniel. Perhaps in this piece of writing we see the effect of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, which most scholars think was close in time to the writing of this gospel.

Aside from the terror of the violence, the key issue facing the Jewish people at that time was what to do when the Temple was no longer there, what to do now the Romans had overrun the place.

In our story, Jesus has just been teaching in the Temple, criticising the officials and the way in which they make themselves look good while exploiting the people who had very little money. He then sits down and sees one of those poor widows feeling obliged to put all she has in the offering plate. And then he comes out of the Temple. Maybe he was furious with the place, and perhaps that fury was at the constraining of God as well as the exploiting of the poor. Maybe it is the last straw when one of his disciples is amazed at the architecture. What amazing buildings! But Jesus sees that all is not well in how the Temple is run. He has in his heart the prophetic insight to be able to see when all is not well and to be able to see how things could be different. And he says it will all be thrown down. He heads off into the apocalyptic language which was more common in his day. All of the violence and oppression is just the beginning, the birth pangs — but after the pain the usual way of things is the joy of a new life. Death leads to resurrection.

The problem for the Jewish people was that the Temple was the key place where you could find the presence of God. That's not to say that God could not be found elsewhere. On Thursday morning at Thursday prayers this last week those of us who were here were considering, among other things, the idea of God passing by, of God being revealed to us in that passing by, a strange experience which can be exciting and mysterious as well as special. But God is found in some special way in the Temple, even if God is not really confined to the Temple.

So the question was: if the Temple is no longer there because the Romans have smashed it about, where can we find God? For the Christian group of Jews (who of course eventually grew beyond Judaism into the faith we share) the answer came to be: in Jesus. It is in Jesus that we can find God. Jesus is a new Temple. There are hints of that idea in the following chapter, where Jesus is accused of saying he will destroy the Temple and build another one in three days.

We may find God in other places, but God has a special presence in Jesus. And the message those early Christians proclaimed was that, despite appearances, Jesus was not destroyed by the Romans. Unlike the Temple, Jesus lives on.

Those disciples marvelled at the enormous stones used in the construction of the Temple. Perhaps Jesus also looked beyond them to who might have been forced to build the thing in the first place. That would certainly have fitted his attitude inside the Temple, where he spotted exploitation and spoke out about it. But a strange thing which has occurred again and again in the history of religious buildings is that even if there are mixed or even poor motives for the construction of a building, God can still win through and people can find God in such places.

How do we find God in our religious buildings? The Temple wasn't a place for gathering in the same kind of way that churches are, and churches originated in homes and then buildings which looked more like civic buildings than religious ones. But the idea of God still wins through and more and more we find the buildings somehow speaking of God, whether it's the solid order of a neo-classical church or the soaring towards heaven of a gothic one. And, strange as it may seem, people will find God in this building here in Woodstock. How does this building speak of God? Yes, we say things and we sing things in here which in more logical detail speak of God, but everything that's in here says something. And, of course, you may have particular buildings special to you where you have found God. For many of us I'd guess the mighty stones of cathedrals might be right up there

God is found beyond the Temple, passing by, not only in our religious buildings but of course in the people. Where two or three are gathered, Christ is there. We are the Body of Christ and if Christ is like the Temple then surely in some strange, exciting and special way, so are we. God's presence can be found in us as we gather together.

That's why the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says we should provoke one another to love and good deeds, encouraging one another. Let's provoke one another to love and good deeds. *Provoke*: there's a strange and exciting and special word. There's some odd language about in today's readings! And do not neglect to meet together, says the writer. Apart from the intriguing historical conclusion that this means that some people

had, as we might say, 'ceased to meet', I think there is something here about the value of gathering, of praying together, of talking and listening together. Because that way we open ourselves up to the presence of God. When we gather as the Body of Christ, that means that Christ is among us.

Do we experience God passing by? All that apocalyptic language might make us think that the experience has to be some weird and powerful thing. But remember too the occasion when God passed by and was found in the still, small voice.

After the communion which we shared at Thursday prayers this week, I went to a coffee morning at Tackley and then — and this is confession time — I went to Tackley station for a while. (When I preach about the importance of gathering together, that doesn't rule out time on our own too. We all need that sometimes.)

Sometimes I joke about having had a misspent youth as a trainspotter. In fact I think it was quite well spent really in that respect. And the hangover of that is that I still retain an interest and one of the things I enjoy doing is photographing the railway. I had a bit of a hunch that something interesting might be passing through and a little bit of detective work meant that my guess was that it was some new coaches which had been shipped in to Bristol and were being delivered up to Manchester.

So after the coffee morning I called in at Tackley station. The train I was hoping to see was late but I had lost track of how late. In the end I gave up and left to go home for my lunch and, as I got in the car, I saw exactly the special train I had guessed it would be go past in my rear-view mirror.

But the disappointment of that moment will disappear and I will find I have discovered a quiet space which gives me a chance to reboot myself, a place with decent photographic opportunities and the chance of lovely light. Because the light was surprisingly lovely and I experimented a bit and began to find some opportunities for interesting photographs of more normal trains.

It's not all about finding the exciting, the strange, the special. The unusual train, the apocalyptic vision, the powerful experience of God. It's not all about finding the exciting, the strange, the special. It's about finding the exciting, the strange and the special in what at first might appear ordinary.

So as we gather in this place, expect that sometimes we might just find God here. As we go from this place, expect that sometimes we might just find God out there. There's some weird and scary stuff around at the moment. But here's some good news: the exciting and special and frankly strange experience of encounter with God can be found in the ordinary. So be present in the things of the world, infused with the life of God.