

33rd Sunday Year C Mary Mags

Luke 21:5-19

Like many Anglicans, I am rather fond of the poetry of T.S. Eliot, but as a preacher I am all too aware his dangers: in fact, I have heard discerning members of Oxford congregations say something along the lines of, When the preacher quotes the Four Quartets, I reach for my gun. Nevertheless, the words “In my beginning is my end” are apt for Luke’s gospel. The end which we have reached is the end of the church’s year, and we have almost completed our concentration on Luke, which will be replaced in the cycle of readings by Matthew on Advent Sunday.

Commentators often remark on the fact that Luke ends where he begins, in the temple at Jerusalem. His narrative starts with Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, taking his turn as a priest and serving at the altar of incense; it ends with the eleven disciples being “continually in the temple praising God”. In between, the temple itself serves both a narrative and a theological purpose which goes well beyond the emphasis of the other three gospels. Luke is the only evangelist to tell us of the presentation in the temple, and the only source for the story of the

boy Jesus with the teachers in the temple; he tells the story of the temptations in a different order from that of Matthew, so that it ends with Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple; he places Jesus in the temple almost permanently once he has entered Jerusalem. The passage we heard this morning, with its prediction of the temple’s destruction, is spoken by Luke’s Jesus from within the temple itself – both Matthew and Mark have Jesus leave the temple before he begins to prophesy its oncoming woes.

Why is this significant? The reasons are historical and theological, and we ought to know enough about the Bible to know that these two are never fully to be separated. Luke is writing at a time after the Jewish revolt against Rome and the subsequent destruction of the temple, in AD70. The ritual life of the temple had come to an end, and the Jewish world was forced to rethink and reinvent itself to cope with the seemingly permanent exile into which all had been forced. In Christian rhetoric, the destruction of the temple was seen by some as a judgement on failure to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ. For Luke, more important is the notion that the temple is no longer required, for just as the Holy of Holies had been the very dwelling place of God, the physical location of his presence on earth, now that presence and that dwelling continues not through a building in one particular place, but in a person – Jesus Christ

– a person in whom all can be raised to a universal and eternal life with God.

Scholars have spent much ink discussing Luke’s eschatology, that is, how Luke deals with the expectation of the last things and the coming of Christ. It used to be fashionable to see Luke emphasising delay, waiting, presumably because of worry at the fact that Christ had not come, although the church had reached its second and third generations. But such a view is apt to distort, since whilst Luke undoubtedly stresses the importance of the here and now, he does not downplay the significance of the future either.

It is the Fourth Gospel, John, which tells us explicitly that when Jesus predicts the destruction and rebuilding of the temple, he is referring to the temple of his body. Luke gives us only the prophecy of doom – “there shall not be left here one stone upon another which will not be thrown down”, a prophecy carried in Mark and in Matthew as well. Luke’s own stress on the physical temple lends these words an aspect less obvious in the other gospels. If we follow chapter twenty one through to the end we will find that he reports Jesus referring quite explicitly to the coming war – “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies”; the knowledge that the temple is no more, and that perhaps a generation has passed since its destruction, gives readers of Luke a new

perspective. The time when these things will come to pass is not yet, so do not be led astray, but it is coming, and before it comes there will be division, trial and persecution to be faced by all who call themselves disciples.

There is, it seems, a clear link between the destruction of the temple, and the crisis of judgement which will require such endurance on the part of Christians. There is also, of course, a clear link between these two things – destruction and judgement – and the passion narrative which is to follow. Matthew, Mark and Luke all place Jesus’ prediction of the temple’s end and his sermon on the coming judgement immediately before they tell the story of the passion. Luke’s intention in re-focusing the presence of God away from a building and on to a person, is played out to the end of his gospel – as we have seen, it ends in the temple. The destruction of the temple, therefore, is not simply an event at this point unrealised, to which the evangelist refers after the fact, writing years later. The destruction of the temple is also the climax of Luke’s gospel, the heart of his narrative, because the personal presence of God, the personal temple who is Jesus Christ is about to be subjected to judgement, violence and destruction.

As readers, we might be inclined to breathe a sigh of relief. The future torments have been realigned, Luke’s narrative theology is telling us to

reconsider, the fear of trial and persecution must recede. But to do so would be to leave the allegory incomplete, for if the fate of human conflict and violence is borne by the one who is nailed to the cross saying “Father forgive them”, then the reality of that passion and that sacrifice, in which we are enabled to share in our sacramental worship, must include our own judgement as well. Not for nothing does the Book of Common Prayer enjoin us to strict self examination when we approach the Lord’s table. The trials of those early Christians are not absent from your life and mine, they are simply re-positioned, so that our accusations come from within, our questions gnaw from the inside, our security is threatened by the injunction to love, our complacency called to account for itself in front of the altar of our salvation.

Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, and I mean what I say. His word, not mine, is what heals. To be united with Christ in his death and resurrection is to be challenged to meet and to bear all the dangers that our oh so safe and respectable minds are so unwilling to admit, to meet and to bear them in the presence of the crucified one, within the temple of Jesus Christ’s own body, the temple which was destroyed and eternally rebuilt. The giant stones of our inadequacy which we haul to that temple are lifted from us and returned by the one who unites our offering with his, and they are given back transformed by the one who replaces lifeless stone with the bread of life itself.