

## Remembrance Sunday 2004

### Luke 21:5-19

Was Jesus a prophet? To many, the term is used of him pejoratively. Jesus, some argue, was indeed a prophet but no more. That is the position of the Koran, for example. Many agnostic admirers of Jesus would say that he was "just" a prophet, a phrase which no Muslim would ever use, since prophets are to be held in high esteem. But that little word "just" shows that some who doubt the veracity of any religious tradition regard the term prophet as an acceptable label for the historical figure of Jesus without committing themselves to adherence to Christian teaching.

In one sense, Jesus obviously was a prophet. He spoke the word of God. The Hebrew Bible is filled with the stories and sayings of those who call the people of Israel back to obedience to the Lord their God, those who smite the prevailing regimes and circumstances with words which could lead easily to revolution. The common misconception that a prophet is one who foretells the future trivializes this fundamental aspect of the Judaeo-Christian

tradition, that God chooses to speak through people, through their words and through their actions.

My question, however, relates to the other, more common but less important, use of the word prophet. One who indeed foretells, as well as forth tells. This morning's gospel is, in part, a collection of sayings which appear very deliberately to predict future events. Each of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – contains a long discourse towards its end, in which Jesus talks of the crisis of coming judgement and, perhaps, of the end of the world. Crucially, each begins this discourse with a prophecy concerning the temple. You see these buildings – there will not be a single stone upon another which not be thrown down. The temple, it seems, is doomed to be destroyed. Immediately those hearing ask when these things will take place, and they are warned not to be hasty. Many will come, many will make false claims, trials, persecutions, betrayals, arrest, imprisonment, torture – all these await the followers of Christ, it seems. But endurance will bring life.

These prophecies, and in particular the opening statement concerning the temple, have long puzzled Christians. The rather

garbled accounts of Jesus's trial which we read in Mark and Matthew – our two earliest gospels – suggest that Jesus's words about the temple were one of the major reasons why he was arrested. Prophecy against the temple, as some understood it, by claiming that it would be destroyed, was no trivial matter, for the Temple was the very centre of Jewish life, of the whole world view of Hebrew theology. Mount Zion, true pole of the earth. The dwelling place of the divine presence, the focal point of worship and sacrifice.

Jesus's prophecy was, of course, fulfilled. The armies of Vespasian and then Titus crushed the Jewish revolt which broke out in 66AD, eventually besieging Jerusalem for very many months before Titus and his hordes plundered the temple and carried off the sacred vessels as had Nebuchadnezzar six hundred and fifty years earlier – and took them in triumph back to Rome where his father, Vespasian, was by now undisputed emperor. It is impossible to over estimate the importance of the destruction of Jerusalem for us who try to understand the New Testament and early Christianity. In fact, one of the surest pieces of evidence that many Christian texts are early is their failure to mention this event specifically. This is not true of Luke, however, because in the passage which follows our gospel, he has Jesus say “When you

see Jerusalem surrounded by armies”, even using the same word – camps – as the Jewish general turned Roman historian Josephus in his record of the Jewish war.

The impending destruction of the temple is a theme throughout Luke's gospel. His repeated references to it – his is the only gospel with the story of Christ's presentation in the temple, and the only gospel in which the boy Jesus teaches there at the age of twelve – these references are part of his emphasis that the physical structure of the temple in which the presence of God was known to dwell, has been replaced by the personal reality of Jesus Christ of Nazareth a man who, it would seem, predicted thirty and more years before the event that the days of the temple were at an end.

Setting up Jesus as a point of comparison and contrast with a physical building seems strange, but it was clearly something the early Christians were used to hearing. In the second chapter of John, Jesus is challenged to provide a sign. He answers that this – Herod's temple – has taken forty-six years to build. He will raise it, once destroyed, in only three days. The narrator makes explicit the symbolism therein – he was talking, we are told, of the temple of his body. And each of the three synoptic gospels places the prophecy of the coming judgement, the eschatological discourse,

that is the discussion of the last things, immediately before the onset of the passion narrative itself. There is a clear link being drawn between the future crisis of humankind and the impending betrayal, arrest, condemnation and death of Jesus. The allegorical understanding of the temple and its destruction seems as old as Christian theology.

How appropriate, perhaps, to be considering the cataclysm which befell first century Jerusalem on this Remembrance Sunday and at such a time of uncertainty in the Holy Land. Security is something each of us is able to take for granted in ways of which others can only dream. Many, thankfully, still recall the extraordinary experience of a country struggling for survival in the second world war. Many have written and spoken of the horrors which then befell Judaism, and it is the responsibility of us all to keep such things alive in painful recollection. Few of us can imagine the colossal shock and tragedy of the first world war, the death of utopian confidence in human progress, the loss of much of an entire generation in what must have seemed so noble a cause. Some of us know more than others about the fear and outrage and hatred which characterizes much of Israel and Palestine, but none

of us truly knows what it is to live in constant and genuine fear of violent death.

Strangely, however, it is we with our safety, our thankful remembrance, our security, who are out of step with the world and its history, and the world of the New Testament in particular. Violence, danger, uncertainty and sacrifice were the stuff of the first disciples and their successors. But their precarious existence was somehow also a saved existence, and that is clear above all from the fact that judgement, disaster, destruction are all in the gospels placed as closely as possible to the passion of Christ. The sacrifice of God himself had brought all other sacrifice to an end. A body broken in judgement and death raised up not just a new man but a new world, a new way of living, of living, of hoping and of praying. Once again in this celebration and remembrance, that body will be broken. At this altar it is we who are saved. Pray, then, for the peace of Jerusalem.