

'I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.'

Stick and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.

Anyone who has ever experienced bullying knows how untrue this is.

Words have power - the power to build up and the power to destroy.

Jesus himself knew this – 'it is what comes of the mouth that defiles.'

The letter of James warns of the power of the tongue which he describes as a 'restless evil.'

It will be interesting to see over the next month in this election season how words are used – to see how truths and untruths are told on all sides.

Jesus' has choice words in today's Gospel reading.

He speaks of wars and insurrections, of the rising of nation against nation and kingdom against kingdom.

Of earthquakes, famine and plagues.

Of the betrayal by parents and brothers, relatives and friends.

To hear these words provokes real fear in his listeners both then and today.

This is a Gospel story also found in Matthew and Mark's Gospels.

and is an example of a type of Biblical writing called 'apocalyptic.'

A word that literally means 'revelation'

Apocalyptic writing in the Bible looks to the future and is about the revealing of spiritual truths, normally associated with God's ultimate plan for his world.

Jesus' words today are distinctly apocalyptic:

This talk of the end.

They are words that would have felt really relevant to the hearers of Luke's time:

In verse 5 and 6 Jesus speaks of the destruction of the temple – ‘the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’

In 70 AD the temple in Jerusalem is destroyed by the Romans;

Luke in his Gospel focuses more on this temple destruction of the temple than either Matthew and Mark,

For those early Christians who were members of Luke’s community, hearing these words Jesus’ promises must have felt like prophecy being fulfilled,

And yet in the midst of that turmoil, Jesus himself has promised to be there.

Apocalyptic writing in scripture has another key element:

And it is that it always emphasises that God is in control,

It emphasises God’s providence, God’s contained sustaining hand upon creation.

Jesus speaks to this end: he knows God is in control and so he is able to move his words from ones of fear to comfort.

Jesus’ words of warning, of destruction and chaos have to be taken alongside his message of assurance, of the promise that these things must and will happen,

But that in the midst of the pain and turmoil, Christ himself will be with them.,

In verse 14 he says ‘make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.’

He is telling his disciples then and his disciples now that in the midst of pain, it is His strength, given through the power of the Holy Spirit, that will sustain.

Jesus knows that humankind is simply not able or capable of standing in its own strength, it can only do so because of and through Him.

This is why he can with certainty tell his followed to not be afraid.

This Gospel is deliberately chosen today for this point in the church’s calendar.

The church year is racing to a close.

Christ the King next week marks the end of the liturgical year

Soon the Church will start Advent, a new church year.

It is often said that Advent is a time to prepare,

To prepare hearts and lives for the arrival of Jesus in the manger.

For in that manger the world sees the ultimate power of words,

‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’

There in the manger is the Word incarnate,

God made flesh,

And because of that wondrous event of the incarnation, the world today has found sure and certain hope of God being with us in and through the wars and persecutions of today.

It is only that knowledge, that promise, that the church is able to exist

It is only by that knowledge that our brothers and sisters across the globe who truly know what it is to be persecuted for their faith are able to stay strong in that faith.

The Word is made flesh.

But this is why the true Advent is not just the four weeks before Christmas,

The true Advent is now, in this between time of Christ’s ascension and second coming.

In a world full of competing words, the Church today more than ever needs to hold true, has to endure, to the Word made flesh.

As Jesus says, in that endurance, in the pursuit of that ultimate truth, we will find our souls.

That is why Jesus’ words of the end times,

Of destruction and pain are not the end of the story.

The end of the story is the new world that God is constantly speaking into creation through the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

A world and a universe that culminates with the Son of Man sitting upon his throne for all eternity – which the Church catches a glimpse of next week in Christ the King.

And there is an implication here for the Church and indeed for the world: as it endures so it is tasked with preparing.

In the reading from Thessalonians Paul speaks against idleness, against sitting back complacently.

There are some strands of Christianity that see the events Jesus speaks of in the world today and believe that if the world is coming to an end, then they simply need to sit back and wait:

“eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.”

But the world – and often the church – seems to have forgotten that – God is still at work, still sustaining his creation.

Today’s passage though speaks against that,

It reminds those who are genuinely persecuted and tortured for their faith that God is continuing to sustain and equip.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet put it like this: ‘there’s a divinity that shapes our ends.’

Jesus’s words to His disciples are ones that assure them that God’s providence is there.

And if His words, those of the word made flesh, are true,

Then for the Church there is a real imperative to be caught up into that.

Martin Luther supposedly said that if ‘tomorrow were the Day of Judgement, I would plant an apple tree.’

This Gospel is all about being ready,

Abut preparing lives and souls for Christ’s eventual return.

Thomas Aquinas speaks of prudence – which for him is not so much about being cautious, but about our participation in God’s providence, that ability to see God at work in and through what we might see as the times of chaos and destruction.

It doesn’t mean we rush around being busy all the time; but it means that the Christian spirit is one that is living as if Christ’s return were imminent – being prepared in the unpreparedness.

As St. Paul so aptly said, ‘keep your eyes on the prize.’

For a world at odds with itself,

And a Church divided, Jesus’ words need to be heard afresh again.

The Good News that God has entered into creation to redeem and is continuing to redeem it,

And that in the midst of the trouble and the strife,

Salvation has arrived in the eternal Word made flesh,

Who enters creation not with the sound of a trumpet or drums,

But with the sound of a baby’s cry.

Amen.