

Good Shepherd Sunday 18th November 2018
Our Great Temple
Daniel 12.1-3 and Mark 13.1-11

It's not often that we read from the book of Daniel. There's reasons for that. Apart from selected texts like the lion's den and the fiery furnace, which we mostly use as children's stories, the book of Daniel reads like Shakespeare does to me - all's well that ends well but I've not got a clue what's going on. It might not be as you like it, but I got an A for an English essay on Measure for Measure without reading the book - a friend of mine summarised it for me and in a midsummer night I wrote it up. Some say it was Much Ado About Nothing, others say it was shocking behaviour, though clearly not a Comedy of Errors, but I may as well retire to a Hamlet as far as purists are concerned, but you can't Tame a Shrew when the Tempest strikes, and if you don't believe me just ask Bottom.

What I've just done is fill your mind with familiar - or less familiar - images and pictures and stories that are well known in our culture. So if you know your Shakespeare, you recognise the prompts. Otherwise, it's over your head. That's exactly like much of Daniel, and also the passage in Mark when Jesus suddenly goes all apocalyptic.

Daniel, by the time he has reached chapter 12, is talking about how everything that the people knew was going to be - or had been - totally shaken, destroyed. The destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon, the desecration of the temple.... all that the people held dear and built their security on was under threat, or gone. The language he used sounds bizarre and unfamiliar to us, like the book of Revelation, but that's ok because it's specialist language. To understand it without studying it is like expecting to understand Shakespeare or a medical textbook or the plot twists of Midsomer Murders. Ok not that one.

Jesus then uses similar language when talking to the disciples in Mark's gospel. Prior to this he has been in the Temple, the centre of the Jewish world, the place it was believed that God dwelled, where heaven met earth in the holy of holies, a place of great ritual and hierarchy and splendour. He has just been arguing with the leaders, and upsetting them by claiming that teachers of the law are arrogant hypocrites, self-important and harsh to the poor. He sees the poor

widow put in her tiny offering, and claims that is worth more than all the rich people's large offerings. So he talking about all that they know being turned upside-down, which is actually the right way up; then he goes one step further. When his disciples comment on the massive stones the temple is built with, he says even this will be turned upside-down.

Take a moment to contemplate that. Herod has rebuilt the Temple that was destroyed back in Daniel's time, it is the biggest and best building most people will have seen. It was their security, their safety, a sign of their endurance, of God's solidness; a physical representation of their belief that they were blessed, chosen. And Jesus says this, this is going. The disciples first question is 'When?' Should we panic? Jesus doesn't give a time or date; but rather, he tells them to be ready. Be ready to be persecuted. Be ready to be challenged. Be ready to suffer for what you believe.

Because all that you trust in will be stripped away. You will no longer be able to rely on it. Your scaffolding is going. Your outer shell that protects you is going. Will you still be able to stand?

It can be hard for us to understand this, unless it has happened to us, to know what it might be like to have everything stripped away to reveal our faith for what it is - which may be strong, enduring and hopeful, or may be a bit quivery, uncertain, prefers to hide behind... what? For the Jewish people it was the temple, until 40 years after Jesus when it was finally destroyed, and never rebuilt. What is it for us, at the Good Shepherd?

I was at a licensing service recently, at another church, and the bishop issued them with a very public challenge. He said in his sermon, you say on your website this church is well known for it's beautiful building, traditional worship and accomplished choir... all those things are good, but wouldn't it be good if you were known for serving the poor and being at the serving the community? At first it is easy to be smug, haha they are being called out... but, what would he say to us? What are we known for? Extensions. Facilities. Fairs. Of course there's more to us than that, but we can so easily find our security in these things. What if they were stripped away? What if the builders accidentally blew the building up in January? Or we canceled the

fairs? Who are we then? Would we cease to exist without the familiar surroundings, the familiar rituals, the picture that's in all our publicity?

The greek word we translate as church is ekklesia, which literally means the 'called out ones', or 'assembly' - it was a political term for a gathering of people. The importance of who we are cannot be contained in a building, as it could not be contained in the Temple.

The Jewish people thought the temple was too big to fail. Indestructible. We know all about things that are too big to fail, from the Roman Empire to Carillion, RBS to the US army in Afghanistan; apartheid, Robert Mugabe... what about things that seem solid now but may well fall? Amazon, the dominance of the West, SportsDirect, our weather, peace... and where are we as a church in all that? Brexit riots? Who are we? Would our focus change, and if so, why doesn't it change now?

I was at a conference this week called the Pan-London Churches Serious Violence Summit - it was called as a response to the epidemic of knife crime in the capital, particularly among the young. We met with and had talks from people who worked with and knew some of the teenagers who have been killed or injured this year. What can we do? It's not yet a big problem here in Sutton, but it won't be long. We heard that in Croydon, all the victims and perpetrators of knife crime were not in full-time education, i.e. were excluded. How do we deal with young people who don't fit in an academic world obsessed with grades and league tables? One of the most dangerous times for young people is between 4-6pm, after school. How can we make it safer for them?

As parents and employers and suburbanites we can collude with the pressure facing young people, instead of nurturing and encouraging character we obsess over exam grades and salaries and success... because those things are tangible outcomes, bricks in our temple of reliability. We need to think differently. As the church we are experiencing decline - statistics came out this week for the church of England, showing a 15% decline in adult attendance since 2007... and a 24% decline in children. If children and young people do not know they are valued they will not come, and neither will their families. We need to think differently.

I finish with 2 quotes from a teenager who spoke at the summit. She was someone who had been mentored by XLP, and had found her way out of a troubled youth due to their support. Firstly she said that we, adults, should see ourselves as batteries, and every encounter with a young person is our opportunity to recharge them, to recharge their soul with life. Can we do that? It doesn't take much. Be interested, remember their names, include them. Secondly and more poignantly she said this. You know the proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child'? Well a village can also kill one. If a young person doesn't feel a part of the village they will burn it down just to feel its warmth.

We need young people to know the warmth of our community so they don't feel the need to burn it down. Youth culture is in crisis and so much is to do with a lack of knowledge that they are loved and valued. In extreme cases they turn to nihilism and violence. In Sutton the problem isn't knife crime but self harm and suicide. For many of the same reasons.

What do we do? We step out from the safety of our temple stones. The advice for local churches was get involved in mentoring young people, run after school homework clubs or hangout clubs. I've already spoken to the head of Stanley Park High about that as a possibility, I've been to see the Change Foundation who do it with young refugees. We don't want to wait until it's too late.

We seek to do this as those who trust in Jesus, who replaced the temple. The temple was destroyed, and rebuilt in 3 days - that is him, and his body, the place where God dwelled. It is in him we place our faith not temples built of stone or exam grades or payslips or social standing or generosity. And finally we remember that Paul calls us temples of the Holy Spirit, because he dwells in us. Wherever we go. So not only are we batteries of hope, but batteries of the Holy Spirit. Let's recharge the world with him.