

Reflection for the Second Sunday before Advent. Luke 21: 5-19

Herod the great, 73 BCE to 4 BCE, was King of Judea, appointed by the Romans, and it has to be said a very pro Roman figure. Herod embarked on a considerable programme of building castles, bridges, forts, and the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem. The Temple had always been an imposing structure set on the top of the hill, visible for miles. Herod set out to out 'bling' anything else in the world. Josephus tells us that the outer wall was covered with plates of gold and beautiful stones which reflected the rising sun. It was one of the great wonders of the world.

Jesus tells them that the time is coming when not one stone will not be left upon another. One could imagine the gasps of horror. It would be like the destruction of Westminster Abbey, Windsor Castle, or the Houses of Parliament; unimaginable, unthinkable. Yet in around 70 AD the Roman Legions swept in and destroyed the Temple completely. By the time Luke was writing this had happened, so Jesus was foretelling an event in the future. Jesus has other warnings; He warns that we may be led astray by false prophets. We are reminded that wars and all kinds of natural disasters will happen. We are also warned that persecutions of followers of Christ will happen. All these things have happened and are happening now. As Christians, here in England, we do not face active persecution but in other parts of the world Christians face real persecution. What we must be aware of is a sort of benign persecution which passes us off as irrelevant and of no importance. We may not face physical abuse, but this is also a danger.

So why did the temple have to go? The reason that it went was because it perpetuated a way of relating to God that required both elaborate ceremonial and a hierarchy of intermediaries. Jesus spoke against those who were more concerned with their status, those who set themselves apart and adapted the laws to suit themselves and yet loaded others with burdensome rules. Jesus offers a new promise, a new covenant, with direct access to God without the need for an intermediary.

As we look into the future, much as we value our way of worship and our strong traditions, we must ask ourselves if this will be relevant in the future. The first century Jewish community valued their Temple, but it became too important, the Temple itself became the object of worship. Could we be getting close to this with our ancient places of worship? We value them, we have emotional attachment to them. Does the amount of time and effort we have expend as custodians of our beloved ancient buildings distract us from the things we ought to be doing? Moving away from our buildings will be like pulling out our teeth – very painful although sometimes necessary. This may not be something we have to face in the immediate future, but the time could come.

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