

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 17 November 2024 - The Second Sunday Before Advent

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Daniel 12.1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10.11-14 [15-18] 19-25; Mark 13. 1-8

The Homily follows the readings, but this day is also Safeguarding Sunday. There are fantastic materials available at <https://safeguardingsunday.org/> (you'll need to register), including prayers and a talk, for children and adults. Please consider including at least some safeguarding material in your service today. If you make it the main theme, please consider carefully how you will care for anyone in whom the content raises upsetting thoughts.

Homily

Today's homily has been written by the Revd Iain Osborne, Senior Chaplain and Strategy Advisor to the Acting Bishop of Ely

Today's readings are all about the end of the world. There is perhaps no part of the Creed that troubles modern English churchpeople more. Either we are frightened of it, or we don't believe in it. It's good, therefore, that the lectionary invites us to think about it, in the run-up to Advent. Let us consider two simple questions:

- What does the Bible actually say about the end of the world? and
- How might we feel about it?

First, what does the Bible actually say?

That's a simple question, but the answer is not totally simple, because most books in the Bible do not offer simple narrative descriptions. The biblical texts about the end of the world are certainly not plain narratives. They are poetry, written in highly symbolic language, full of dramatic images of beasts and blood. Their writers were trying to move people's emotions more than paint them a map; they were trying to be memorable and influential, rather than trying to be precise about chronology or event.

So how can we understand their meaning? The nature of these texts means it is foolish to expect the Bible's vivid end-of-world poetry to tell us an exact sequence of events, when things will happen, exactly who gets snatched up to heaven, and so forth. But we can draw meaning from these texts by looking at the symbols, and at the themes that the texts have in common.

Some people think that, because the texts are poetic or symbolic, that there is no literal truth involved at all. That the idea of the End of the World is nothing but a metaphor. Those people might say that an individual person's spiritual experience could undergo the kind of upheaval and transformation that is described poetically. But that, in terms of history, no apocalypse is to be expected. They would think that history and events will

proceed, in the normal way, without any end... unless perhaps in about 5 billion years when the sun will swallow the earth because of the laws of physics.

But this is surely not in line with the Bible, because there is a strong agreement between the different biblical voices that there will in fact be an end. This is not making a point about dates or methods, but about meanings: it says that history is an arrow, not a wheel. That the world's life has a point and a purpose, and a sense of direction.

This is not simply representing an ancient view of the world. In fact, when the Bible was written, most people thought that history was cyclical and endless. The Judao-Christian view was quite distinctive, as expressed in the Bible: that history will reach a destination, because it is purposeful.

Another theme found across the biblical texts share is that there will be a lot of suffering. Now, this does not mean that God plans to cause the suffering. That is not what the texts say, and that view makes no sense compared to Gods' character as revealed in Jesus. Look again at what Jesus says in Mark, or what we read from Daniel. What is being said is simply that things will get better before they get worse. What causes the suffering isn't God, it's human wickedness. It's the sad old familiar causes that we know about cruelty, warfare, inequality, a lack of compassion and solidarity.

And there is a sense that our wickedness is accelerating. Surely, this is realistic. We may be no crueller and more selfish than millenia ago, but we are more powerful: unlike the Romans, we now have the power to rain death on a whole city; to wipe out all life on earth through a nuclear miscalculation; to destroy the eco-system on which our lives depend. The sense that things will get worse before they get better seems quite realistic.

But the Bible does not wallow in this. In face of the world's suffering, the Bible asserts good news. These evils are not inescapable and cyclical... but will end. We are in a battle of good against evil – of God against evil - which is rising towards a crescendo of fierce conflict; and God will win. And after that will come a release, and a new dawn.

That promise is the most important Christian teaching about the end of the world. The Bible tells us that, in the end, God's own life will come to permeate the world in which we live. It's not a question of us going to heaven – heaven will come to earth. And this sunburst will happen dramatically, all of a sudden. Heaven will come to earth. This is wonderful news.

Of course, God brings not just love and joy, but also light and truth; which means the Last Day will include judgement. Everything will come to light, all will be known.

So, how might we feel about the Last Day?

So much gloomy nonsense is spoken about the apocalypse, that it is hard to suggest what good news we are hearing. But it is, in fact, fantastic and wonderful. The sad, boring cruelty of the world as we know it is not going to go on forever. God will come, in the fullness of God's life, a sunburst of joy and release, bringing ultimate victory over evil.

A day of joy. Although, yes, it will also be a day of truth – when all will be revealed, and when we will all face God's judgement. Need we fear that?

I am quite sure that for every one of us God's judgement will be a pretty uncomfortable experience. Not because God is going to do something nasty to us, but because we do it to ourselves. Most of us live torn between who we want to be, and who we are. Most of us do things we would prefer kept quiet. Most of us, frankly, will experience deep shame when all is revealed.

So, yes, judgement might be a hard day. But this is not judgement for the purpose of our destruction, but judgement for the purpose of God's invincible love. Truth-telling might hurt, but it will be cleansing. And, above all, our judge is Jesus – who has shared our life, who is Himself on our side. When we respond to shame by asking forgiveness, there will be mercy, flowing like a river. You can't have one without the other: judgement brings mercy, mercy arises out of judgement.

Is this good news? It is certainly better than the alternative. The alternative is to believe that what we have now, is all we are going to get. That there will be no final victory. That the wicked will never be held to account. That is definitely bad news!

Do you not long for God's final victory? Do you not long for justice and mercy, for the unity of all people and the healing of creation? Do you not long to get past the slings and arrows of mortality, and to see God face to face?

The coming end of all things is wonderful news. Let us join with the great cry of the Church, as it echoes down through history: Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!

Ways to Engage all Generations

When different generations are gathered together in worship there is an opportunity to build relationships and to encounter God in our conversations as we build relationships and learn from each other no matter what our ages, stage of life or faith and for all present to feel included. Adding some wondering questions to the service at an appropriate moment can help to do this.

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder what your favourite part of the story/passage is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder who your favourite character is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder how _____ felt or I wonder how _____ felt when _____ happened?
- I wonder how you feel about _____?
- I wonder where you are in this story?
- I wonder what part of the story is about you?
- I wonder what the [tree, pearl, coin] could really be?
- I wonder why _____ said _____?
- I wonder what we can learn about God in this story?

Suggested intercessions

On the lectionary theme of the Last Day...

- Pray for the whole church, that we might be inspired with an urgent longing to see God's love and justice roll out, and an urgent sense that we do not have all the time in the world to share the Gospel.
- Pray for those suffering from others' evil: that God will bring justice and mercy.
- Pray for all of us, who do evil. That we may repent and receive mercy.
- Pray especially for those who feel the world has fallen on their heads. The people of Gaza and Lebanon, and the victims of terrorist attack on Israel. People under attack in Ukraine, Sudan and around the world.
- Pray for those close to their own death. That they may have someone to help them pass over, and that they may feel prepared for what comes after.

On the Safeguarding theme:

Dear God,

We pray for all those who serve in a safeguarding role within our Church.

We especially pray for [Name(s) of your Safeguarding Lead or team].

Thank you for their willingness and time they give to fulfil this important task.

Give them your wisdom, discernment, and strength.

Help us support them in their role, remember them in our prayers, and respond to their requests and advice so that we might be a safer place for everyone.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Amen

Suggested hymns/songs

- My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. A cracking tune, although some of the words need a strong stomach! Read it before you pick it.
- Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty.
- Come, thou long-expected Jesus.
- Come, let us join our cheerful songs
- Thy kingdom come, O God.

Activities to accompany the service:

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- [reflectionary.org](https://www.reflectionary.org/) – lectionary-based resources
- [engageworship](https://www.engageworship.com/) – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@ lectionary resource)