**1 December 2019 Eden**

***And then suddenly – peace***

Our four Bible readings today foreshadow **the last days**. It is a topic I usually avoid speaking about, as there are so many different views and so much has been written about the End Times, Armageddon, Judgement Day and the Second Coming. Also, it’s a topic that has caused conflict within the church, and can be a vehicle for secular society to ridicule the Christian faith. It can polarise congregations and may thus undermine our fellowship and worship.

But it’s a contemporary topic, too. You only have to listen to the debate about climate change to recognise the fear in the community about the future. For this reason I’d like to read a poem I wrote last month. Janice and I had gone up to Melbourne and right outside Flinders Street Station there were lots and lots of people and police. It was clear something was about to happen. It was the day of the Extinction Rebellion protests. For some, climate change is just another herald of the last days. There was an urgency and mood of expectancy in the air. We couldn’t ignore it. This is what I wrote:

Rebels protesting

traffic jamming

strident shouting

doomsday drumming

urgent warning

extinction tomorrow

Drivers fuming

horns honking

time wasting

rats racing

not thinking

about tomorrow

Bystanders peering

rubber necking

drama wanting

boredom rising

attention waning

gone tomorrow

Police enforcing

watchful waiting

trouble striking

swiftly acting

ground hogging

day tomorrow.

Media salivating

sides taking

opinions leading

passions provoking

accountability ignoring

sales tomorrow

MPs grandstanding

quickly mouthing

measured calming

clichéd phrasing

*carpe dieming*

start tomorrow

Everyone hustling

lemmings rushing

this way

that way

no escaping

fate tomorrow

Back now to today’s the theme “***And then suddenly – peace***”. I struggled to understand this at first. How is peace suddenly breaking out the appropriate theme for the imminent disasters climate change threatens, or for the apocalyptic passages where the focus is on disaster, judgement and damnation, followed only sometime later by everlasting peace?

For example, the passage preceding today’s reading from Matthew speaks of the destruction of the Temple, wars, famines, persecution, earthquakes, an increase in wickedness and love growing cold. It’s heavy, scary stuff that has provided fertile ground for authors like Hal Lindsey to present apocalyptic visions in books such as ‘*The Late, Great Planet Earth*’.

But when I studied the passages in more detail, I was quite surprised at what they had in common. So I wanted all four passages read in order to explore common threads that connect them and how we might respond to them.

To begin with, all four passages prophesy about future events:

Isaiah 2

* The mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established
* He will judge
* They will beat their swords into ploughshares

Psalm 122

* Pray for the (future) peace of Jerusalem
* There stand the thrones for (future) judgement
* I will seek your (future) prosperity

Romans 13

* Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed
* The night is almost over
* The day is almost here

Matthew 24

* But about that day or hour no one knows
* One will be taken and one will be left
* The Son of Man will come at an hour you do not expect him

So all the passages direct our attention to the future although, importantly, the key events have not yet occurred:

* Swords have not been beaten into ploughshares
  + Rather, we are spending more on defence
* Jerusalem is not a city of peace
  + Rather, there is continuing conflict there
* The early church expected the return of Christ in their lifetime
  + There have been many failed prophesies about the Second Coming in the last 2,000 years
* Like in the days of Noah, there are prophesies of environmental disaster
  + But this has not yet eventuated

So, how are we to interpret and respond to these passages about the last days? Do they inform and contribute to our worship and Christian living? For example, do we say that, after more than 2,500 years since Isaiah 2 and Psalm 122 were written, and just under 2,000 years since Romans 13 and Matthew 24 were written, they are either misleading or plain wrong, and so are largely irrelevant? If so, we can ignore them. Or have we misinterpreted them and in reality they still contain a compelling message?

Now I firmly believe that all scripture is *God breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness* (2 Timothy 3:16). So rather than just explaining the texts as commentaries on particular political, social and cultural contexts, and primarily relevant to those times, I’ve explored a different perspective to reflect their relevance in today’s world.

In doing so I needed to be mindful of my biases, cultural influences and faith orientations, as they can give rise to what biblical scholars call ***eisegesis*** – reading into the text what I want to find there.

For example, in my work on the VICTAS Synod Ethics Committee, and Earth Ethics in particular, I interpret what is happening in the world around us in terms of spiritual bankruptcy. Moltmann, a leading European theologian, has said as much, that the environmental crisis we are facing is a spiritual crisis. I find support for this, too, in Romans 13 and its exhortations to put aside immorality, and can link the messages of the Extinction Rebellion movement, for example, to Matthew 24 and its references to the days of Noah. This can lend itself to a conclusion that the last days are here.

But I’m cautious about this. An undue focus on the last days can be hijacked by debate on a literalist, premillennial and dispensational eschatology that I don’t find helpful. Further, I’m not convinced that the intent of the authors of these passages was to teach, rebuke, correct and train us regarding the last days. Rather, could the focus of these passages be more about encouraging righteous behaviour today, than speculating about some future event?

To put this in its context, Isaiah 2 and Psalm 122 were scriptural texts the Jewish nation read as it sought to come to terms with the horror of exile in Babylon and the passing of the golden years of King David’s reign. And Romans 13 and Matthew 24 were contemporary scriptural texts read by the early church as it struggled to come to terms with awful persecution.

Did, then, these prophesies about future security and peace in Jerusalem and God coming to judge all nations, comfort and encourage the people of God enough, and provide the answers to the hard questions they asked in their time of suffering?

It’s very tempting to think this, isn’t it? *Hang on and put up with your present suffering. All will be fine in the end, as ultimately God will triumph and the evil doers will get their just desserts.*  I find more than a hint of this in some of the more extreme preaching today about the last days. *Don’t worry, we might live in Godless times, and there will be trials and tribulations, but the righteous have nothing to fear as these passages are warnings to the unbelievers. All you need do is repent, trust in God and you’ll be saved.*

But then I look more closely at the passages and find that their messages are directed more at the behaviour, not the beliefs, of the faithful:

Isaiah 2:6 *Let us walk in the light of the Lord*

Psalm 122 *Peace be with you*

Romans 13 *Behave decently … and clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ*

Matthew 24:42 *Keep watch … be ready*

This leads me to think that the reference to the last days is more a backdrop against which the faithful are urged to live righteous lives.

As I reflect on this, two common phrases I hear today come to mind:

*It is what it is*

*Be the change you want to see in the world*

There will always be wars, and rumours of wars; nations rising against nations; false prophets; wickedness and deception. And we, as ordinary people, encounter suffering, experience injustice and put up with hardships. So what’s new?

***Life is what it is***.

The faith challenge, then, is how we respond now to what life throws at us, not one of leaving it all to the future, to God, to Judgement Day, to Armageddon or to the Second Coming. And if we don’t like what we see in the world around us, maybe the onus is on us to help usher in the Kingdom of Heaven, taking hold of the promise of Jesus that *The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*.

In other words ***Be the change God wants to see in the world***.

It seems to me that this is what Isaiah, David (through the Psalm), Paul (through Romans) and Matthew are all saying:

*Walk in the light of the Lord … now*

*Peace be with you … now*

*Clothe yourselves … now*

*Keep watch … now*

And I was particularly struck by the call in Matthew to keep watch, as we do not know on which day the Lord is coming. And yet arrogantly we can claim to know we are living in the last days although we are told no-one knows the day or the hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Too easily we can get distracted by apocalyptic speculation. Rather, what I hear in Matthew’s gospel is *Don’t worry about it! The last days will take us completely by surprise!* ***Suddenly****. Focus instead on how you live today*.”

For me, peace is God’s Shalom, an active, restorative, fulfilling state that covers health and wellbeing, peace and wholeness, safety and soundness, tranquillity and rest, fullness and harmony.

We may, indeed, be in the last days, but if that is our focus are we missing the primary messages of all of today’s lectionary readings? Are we passing the buck to God, leaving it to God to clear up the mess we have created in God’s beautiful Creation?

However awful the apocalyptic visions might be, maybe the harder message to take out from these God-breathed texts is that we are the agents of God’s Shalom, and that we need to act accordingly. Then we might truly say:

**And then suddenly – peace!**

AMEN