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Distress Among Nations (Luke 21. 25-38)

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In popular culture, the lead up to Christmas is itself a festive time. We know, of course, that not too far beneath the tinsel and lights, many people struggle. For some, there's the anticipation or deepening of loneliness; for some, there's grief for loved ones not here or anxiety about money; for others, painful memories or present experience of difficult family dynamics. On the surface, though, it's jingle bells all the way. The secular season of preparation is designed to be colourful, happy, carol-filled and gift-suffused – like the windows of those Advent calendars we used to open gleefully, day by day, as kids.

And if this has been your customary preparation for Christmas, then the church's readings for Advent will come as a bit of a shock. For in the Christian imagination, the lead up to the big day is characterised to a large extent by foreboding, almost dread. Always, the first week of Advent is apocalyptic. And since we're living in what are increasingly referred to as apocalyptic times, I thought it might be worth engaging this frame more explicitly. Why does our tradition connect Jesus' impending birth with themes of conflict, destruction, 'distress among the nations' and disruption in the cosmos? How is this framing supposed to help us learn his meaning? And how might it offer something for discerning meaning in our times? These are questions I'd like to explore in the next four weeks.

In biblical literature and contemporary usage, the notion of apocalypse is many layered. The word itself means uncovering or unveiling. It refers to the disclosure or revelation of what has been hidden, as in the Revelation or '*Apocalypsis*' of John – the final book of the New Testament. A key premise of apocalyptic thought is that it's given to certain people – prophets and seers – to see more deeply than others, to penetrate appearances to uncover a deeper truth. So that, for example, happenings in history or the natural world can be 'read' as

portending divine presence or action. ‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars’ (Luke 21.25), says Jesus; ‘when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near’ (Luke 21.31). And in biblical literature, this unveiling of meaning in the ‘signs of the times’ is always associated with crisis. As if it’s the disruption of the status quo that enables you to see its underlying reality and import.

In and of themselves, these ideas don’t seem problematic. Times of crisis can make visible, at least ‘for those with eyes to see’, the deeper dimension of things. Some have spoken of the ecological crisis as apocalyptic, for example, not only in the sense that it portends catastrophe, but that reveals something we’ve been oblivious to – the unsustainability of our Western way of life; similarly, the Covid pandemic has disclosed the extent of inequality in our societies in new ways. And yet, as we know, this desire to see beneath appearances in a time of crisis can also easily go wrong. There can be a fine line between the visionary insight of the prophet and the paranoid mis-perception of the conspiracy theorist – as even the book of Revelation seems to indicate. When does the yearning to *penetrate* or *discern* appearances become a distorting mistrust of all appearance?

Another layer in apocalyptic thinking involves notions of divine judgement, usually in the form of vengeance and thus destruction. The apocalyptic imagination is essentially dualistic. There’s a cosmic dualism between heaven and earth; a temporal dualism between this world and the world to come, which will begin with the end (probably the destruction) of this one; and, finally, a social dualism between the good and bad, the righteous and unrighteous, the afflicted and their persecutors.¹ In this vision, God is also conceived in dualistic ways – merciful and good to some, wrathful and violent towards others. Accordingly, divine judgement brings vindication for the righteous and vengeance against the iniquitous. This is a vision, notes James Alison, perhaps particularly appealing to those who feel themselves

¹ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), p.124.

victims, 'those who resent the present order of things'² and want the bastards to get their come-uppance.

This kind of vengeful apocalyptic thinking is undoubtedly present in biblical literature. In the Hebrew scriptures, there's a vision of 'that day', the day of judgement, when God will come to punish the wicked and reward the righteous. The prophet Zephaniah, active in the 7th century BCE, is representative: 'The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; ... That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness' (Zeph. 1. 14-15). And so on. This imagery is taken up in the New Testament by a persecuted church and in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem. But now it is Christ identified as the Lord who will come on 'that day' to judge the quick and the dead, 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory'.

This imagery is troubling and uncongenial to most of us. And the more so that it's not confined to a primitive religious past. 'In its most virulent form', writes American theologian Daniel Migliore, 'contemporary neo-apocalypticism ... divides the world into the good and the evil, demonizes all who are considered enemies, is absolutely convinced of the righteousness of its own cause, and calls for holy warfare'.³

So how are we to approach all this? And again, what's going on that the church begins preparing to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus with this apocalyptic vision of his coming again? Well, we're not going to resolve these questions today. We're taking the four weeks of Advent to explore them! For now, let me note a couple of things that I hope might be fruitful for us to ponder.

Our reading from Luke consists of words attributed to Jesus as he was preparing his disciples for his death, and they point the disciples to something beyond his death and the chaos of its aftermath and the crisis of their times. A

² Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.125.

³ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p.334.

promise of return, a promise of something still being fulfilled, a proclamation of something more to look for. 'Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near'. Personally, I struggle with the whole notion of a literal 'second coming'; it seems mythical (in the bad sense) – a kind of a-historical, magical thinking. What strikes me, however, is that if we focus not in the first instance on the plausibility of this supposed future 'event'; if we look instead to what the promise itself generates, then something else comes into view.

First, Jesus' words create a space of time (the time between his death and resurrection, and the 'end' of all things); and second, they offer a teaching about how it's wise to be in relation to this time. Migliore writes: 'Christian faith is expectant faith. It eagerly awaits the completion of the creative and redemptive activity of God'.⁴ This horizon of expectation generates a particular sense of how it's appropriate to live. It gives a sense of intentionality, even urgency. 'Be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth'.

There are still overtones of threat in the language. The question is whether this threat is intrinsic to what Jesus is trying to communicate. James Alison proposes that it isn't.⁵ Jesus, he argues, clearly makes use of his tradition's apocalyptic imagination to speak to his disciples of such things as the urgency of the time, their answerability to judgement and the horizon of expectation or hope which is to suffuse their living here and now. He makes use of this imagination. But does his way of life and death not also begin to transform it? Indeed, is his birth, his coming vulnerably as a child – is this not the beginning of a subversion from within of the old violent way of imagining God's coming and judgement? So that although we begin preparing for Christmas apocalyptically, perhaps that's not where it ends. These are themes to which we will return in coming weeks.

⁴ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p.330.

⁵ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.125.