

Advent 2, 6 December, 2015, Pusey House

The Lettered Body, the Principal

Readings: 2 Kings 22.8-23.3, Psalm 50.1-6, Romans 15.4-13, Luke 21.25-33

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away.

In gospel reading for today, we hear part of an extended answer to a question. Christ has told his disciples that the Temple in Jerusalem, which is such a symbol of Israel's spiritual and political status, even a token and pledge of the Lord's presence with them, this temple will be destroyed. The surprised disciples ask him, 'When will these things come to pass?' Our Lord does not give them a date and a time. Instead, he speaks of the signs, and of turmoil and terrible hardship, that will accompany the destruction of the temple.

This part of Christ's prophesy was fulfilled w/n 40 years of Christ speaking, before that generation had passed away. After Jewish patriots occupied the city [66 ad], a Roman army was sent to reclaim Jerusalem. After a long and bitter siege, the Romans retook the city in 70 ad. The temple was destroyed, and the city walls were levelled. The historian Josephus said that this destruction was so complete that a visitor arriving at the very site of the city would have asked for directions to find it.

But this is only the surface of the reading, and it does not explain why we hear it read today, in Advent, when we look for the coming of Christ in time, at His Nativity, when we look for His coming again, and when we look for His coming now, to the Church, the world, our souls.

In the course of the very long answer to which Sts Matthew and Luke bear witness, it becomes clear that Christ is not simply speaking about the destruction of the temple. He looks beyond that terrible upheaval and turmoil to a time of upheaval and turmoil for the whole created order.

In other words, Christ's sermon about current events, about the destruction of Jerusalem, "becomes a window through which to see" a much more distant future, to see the end of the world as we know it and the coming of the Son of Man.¹ The destruction of Jerusalem is a "transparent object in the foreground through which he sees the last events before the End."²

It is common today to greet such passages with a certain scepticism. They are just another prophesy of the end of the world that did not come true, and that failure of prophesy leads to a scepticism about the whole passage, or even about the teaching of Christ more generally. I will say a few things about why this is a simplistic reading, a treading on the surface of things. Whatever we say about the coming of the Son of Man, the prophesy that the world we one day pass away is the same thing which the scientists tells us. The mountains and valleys, the rivers and vistas which seem so stable are, from the perspective of geological time, not as permanent as they seem, but the result of processes of upheaval, erosion and change over millions of years. And this changing world will one day pass away, whether in fire or in coldness. Long before human beings began to think in terms of geological or cosmic time, the One who the Bible speaks of as the beginning and the end of all things invites his disciples then and

¹ Frederick D. Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 2: The Christbook*, 473.

² Cranfield, *Mark*, 405, in Bruner, 474.

now to adopt a big picture view. If we want to see things as they are, we need to understand that it is the nature of all created things to pass away. This can be brought home to us in very ordinary ways. We people we love and admire, people who have shaped the world die, we may feel acutely the passing character of things. Or, it may be some political event, the fall of the Berlin wall, 9/11, the threat of war. 'Heaven and earth shall pass away':

The point is this: For all of us, and for each one of us individually, this world, and the things of this world must pass away, not just in some vague, remote and unimaginable future, but right now. They are passing things; that is their very nature. They are passing things, and they are passing away even as we grasp them in our hands. No cleverness, no wishful thinking, no advanced technology can make them anything other than transitory things.³

This is not a gloomy world-denying message. When we try to hold on to things which are passing, we don't cherish them, we pervert them. If our love for passing things, even the most precious things, the most precious people, is not ordered by a love which is eternal, we disfigure them and make them into idols.⁴

Our readings for the second Sunday of Advent are meant to help us see beyond the surface of things, to see more clearly. We are invited to cherish and delight in all that is good, but to see in and through them the Beauty 'ever ancient and ever new'. (St Augustine)

The epistle suggests that one way we see clearly by learning to read with patient understanding. 'Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning; that we, through patience, and comfort of the Scriptures, might have hope.' When we hear this kind of passage read in Church today, we think automatically of the whole Bible. However, for this morning, important to see that the Scriptures St Paul describes here are from the Old Testament. For the first disciples of our Lord, the books of the Old Testament are the things 'written aforetime'. In this passage, St Paul focuses on one issue that caused conflict in the early Church. Are the promises of the Old Testament for the people of Israel only, are they limited to a certain ethnic group, or are they promises for all people? St Paul points to passages of the Old Testament which his countrymen knew well, but which receive their fullest meaning in the teaching of Christ and the person of Christ: ***Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people.***

This kind of debate was common in the early Church. How does one make sense of the Old Testament? Is the God of the early Chapters of the Bible really the same God as the Lord Jesus Christ? How can we make sense of all the killing and violence? One 2nd century disciple of Christ named Marcion argued that the God revealed in the New

³ Robert Crouse, 'Sermon for Advent 2', www.lectionarycentral.com.

⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, chapter 4: 'For to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake. To use, on the other hand, is to employ whatever means are at one's disposal to obtain what one desires, if it is a proper object of desire; for an unlawful use ought rather to be called an abuse. Suppose, then, we were wanderers in a strange country, and could not live happily away from our fatherland, and that we felt wretched in our wandering, and wishing to put an end to our misery, determined to return home. We find, however, that we must make use of some mode of conveyance, either by land or water, in order to reach that fatherland where our enjoyment is to commence. But the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey; and becoming engrossed in a factitious delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy. Such is a picture of our condition in this life of mortality. We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our Father's home, this world must be used, not enjoyed, that so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, that is, that by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal.'

Testament is completely different than the one we find in the Old—He insisted on a sharp distinction between the God of love revealed in the NT and the Law of the OT. Marcion accepted only 10 of St Paul’s letters and a specially edited version of the Gospel of St Luke as fitting to his understanding of God. St Paul, to whom Marcion turned, sees more clearly – the God of Love is revealed in the OT and the NT, that ‘we through patience, and comfort of Scriptures, might have hope’.

This is a key passage, what will give a sure foundation to hope will be a kind of patient reading: ‘Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning; that we, through patience, and comfort of the Scriptures, might have hope.’ To appreciate this, I would like to turn to how E B Pusey helps us to appreciate St Paul’s description. Pusey describes the Old Testament as the lettered body of Christ. IN the same way that the people among whom the Incarnate Lord lived and taught had difficulty in recognizing the Godhead veiled in the flesh, so we may have trouble hearing the eternal Word speaking in the human words of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament, writes Pusey is ‘like the personal appearance of Him, who had in man’s sight ‘no form or comeliness’. These words of Isaiah are the words which the Ethiopian Eunuch read and which St Phillip interpreted in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, they are words which Christians from early days have heard as describing the suffering servant, the Lord Jesus: ‘he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him’ (Isa. 53:2). Pusey applies this words to the Old Testament. In the tumultuous history, in the messy family stories, in the violence and betrayal, in the desire for vengeance that we hear in the psalms, it is all to human – there is no form or comeliness, no beauty, that we should see there the object of our desire. But, argues Pusey, in the same way that Christ’s human body was transformed and glorified by the resurrection, so too is the body of the Old Testament transfigured by the light which shines in it through the Spirit of the risen Christ: ‘when [Christ] appeared in His glory, [the OT] was transfigured, and shone transparently, with a portion of that Majesty which was veiled within it’. The risen body of Christ still bears ‘the print of the nails and of the spear’, and the OT still shows all the varied forms of human weakness and failure. At the same time, this all-to-human body is the lettered body, the ‘living and true Body, which it hath pleased God to take, in order to be accessible to us; and wherein alone we can see Him “Full of grace and truth.”’⁵ In this way, we can hear Christ speaking in the Gospel to his disciples, ‘to the generation of the literal Israel then living’, the generation who would not pass away before the destruction of Jerusalem. At the same time, he is speaking to us, to the spiritual Israel, to ‘the generation of them that seek the Lord’⁶ until He comes again. You may hear that as special pleading, but I would argue that to restrict the argument to the immediate context in which it was written goes against the very point of the answer which Christ gives his disciples, and it fails to appreciate who is speaking.

Well, here you have a theological argument about reading the Bible, but can this also help us to make sense of the world in which we live? Before I finish, I will offer three examples of why this way of reading or seeing the world is so important. I don’t want to keep you all day, so I will be brief.

On Friday, I will go to Kenya and travel about with the current Anglican Archbishop of Kenya, Eliud Wabukala, who was a classmate of mine in Toronto. A couple of weeks before the massacre of 148 people, almost all students, at the Garissa University

⁵ Pusey, ‘Lectures on Types and Prophecy’, 24.

⁶ Ps 24.6, where *genea* is used by LXX.

College, Bp Eliud argued that the President of Kenya should declare corruption to be a national disaster. He repeated this assessment after the murders. He could have pointed to a lot of other problems which would have been easier for those in power to hear, he could have said that national security was the real problem for example. The Archbishop's diagnosis and assessment expresses the logic revealed in the Old Testament reading from 2 Kings. When the people of Jerusalem were facing a national crisis, when her safety was threatened by poor government within and the armies of Babylon without, the prophetess declared that the real national disaster was not political or military, but spiritual. The evils will come upon Jerusalem because 'they have forsaken [the Lord] and burned incense unto other gods' (2 Kings 22.17). The prophetic voice here and now will not just see things on the surface, but will also help to reveal the idols to whom we like to burn incense in our particular post-modern way.

Secondly, I will offer one of the most extreme examples of hearing the voice of Christ in a passage which seems to deny the mercy which Christ reveals. In Psalm 136, the psalmist writes to the 'daughter of Babylon' to the people whose armies threatened Jerusalem when the high priest Hilkiah discovered the law: *Blessed shall he be that taketh thy children : and throweth them against the stones.*

In most lectionaries, this is now left out. Perhaps, since we find it hard to recognize the lettered body of Christ in the humble body of the OT, that is necessary. On the other hand, this is a great loss. The verse expresses a blood-thirsty desire for vengeance against the enemies of Israel. However, the Christian knows that the most terrible enemy is not the enemy of flesh and blood, but the sin which lays behind all evil and bloodshed and destruction. So St Augustine could see the 'little ones' of Babylon to be the evil desires which are the beginnings of full grown sins:

When evil desire is born, before your bad habits reinforce it, while it is still in its infancy and has not yet fortified itself by alliance with depraved custom, dash it to pieces. It is only a baby still. But make sure it does not survive your violent treatment: dash it on the rock, And the rock is Christ (1Cor 10.4).⁷

You may disagree with that interpretation, but it helps us to see how Christ transfigures and changes even the desire for vengeance into a good and godly struggle for good, not for evil. I could also say, that anyone who has wanted to grow in virtue, to become a better person, knows how hard is it to leave behind habits which have become rooted in our lives. Much better to destroy our little sins on the rock which is Christ before they grow up to master us.

And finally, this way of reading the Scriptures patiently is the way which anchors our hope. In the same way that the Risen body of Christ was elusive and difficult to see – remember how the disciples had trouble recognizing him –so is the hidden life of Christ in our lives.

At these time of Advent, if we take the call to self-examination seriously, we may feel discouraged and despondent. If we look closely, we will see lots of rust in our lives, lots of bad habits that we have trouble leaving behind, and we will see how willingly and able we are to hurt others, to manipulate, or to chose power. How well would we fare in an extreme situation, when we were less comfortable, less safe? And here, the way that St Paul and Pusey encourage us to read the bible and the world is also the way we need to read our lives. We are invited to see the divine treasures in the earthen vessels of our

⁷ Augustine, *Expositions of the Plalms*, vi, trans. Boulding, 214.

lives. We are encouraged to see and recognize the grace of God in the life of our friend or colleague, even in the one we find difficult, made like us in the image of God. Even in the disappointments which discourage us, or in the great crisis, we are invited to discern the mercy of Christ shaping us for good. The patient reading of the Bible also teaches us a patient reading of the world and our lives, that we may have hope, that we may find Christ. In the words of a contemporary Anglican divine, one whose eyes were trained to see:

The signs are everywhere around us every day, if we have the eyes to see them. The Advent hope is an other-worldly hope. It looks towards a Saviour who has no worldly power, no worldly recommendation of any sort. It finds in the poor and helpless Infant of Bethlehem the eternal Word of God. It is the contradiction of all worldly hopes and expectations. The heavens and the earth pass away, they are passing away at every moment, but the Word of God does not pass away, and, as today's Collect expresses it, in that Word we have the blessed hope of everlasting life. Amen.⁸

⁸ Robert Crouse, 'Sermon for Advent 2'.