

SUNDAY 14 NOVEMBER 2010

SERMON NOTES

7.00am and 9.00am Eucharist Services

NIC DENNY-DIMITRIOU, CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION, HILTON

Readings for Sun 14 Nov

Focus: Gospel, Luke 21: 5-19

[Based on OT Reading, Malachi 4: 1-6, with its Day of Judgement focus:

A Sunday School teacher was explaining the Day of Judgement to some children: "Thunder will boom," she told them, "Flames will pour from the heavens. There will be gigantic floods, and earthquakes will split open the ground to swallow all."

Said a young boy in response, "Ooh that sounds exciting, I will get off from school!"

Intro to Sermon (summarised at 7am, given in full at 9am service)

For material used today, I am indebted to Nathan Nettleton, whose writings have inspired this sermon and been significantly incorporated into it. He is based in Melbourne, Australia, and his material is often very appropriate, as his church also uses the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) used by many churches today.

Furthermore, the extra or different words I sometimes use at the Eucharist Prayer, are often those written by him. Though I usually only use a short section, and then continue with wording from our Prayer Book, today I am using a fuller Eucharistic Prayer of his, plus words added from another person. The point about them is that they follow the usual pattern of such prayers since the time of the early Church (introduction including summary of "salvation history"; words of "institution" of Jesus at the Last Supper; and "epiclesis" or invocation of the Holy Spirit to transform these elements of bread and wine to become for us the body and blood of Christ), but in doing all that, they reflect the Scripture readings and themes for the day. And to blow your "neat little boxes" ... he is a Baptist! Listen later as I use them, and you will hear references to all of today's readings.

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Can you remember where you were on September 11, 2001? I need not remind you that on that day, two hijacked passenger planes were intentionally crashed into the 110-storey Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City, resulting in the collapse of both buildings soon afterward. [Two other planes were also hijacked and crashed that same day, but my focus now is the two that were crashed into the WTC.] Not one stone was left upon another; all was thrown down. The unthinkable had happened.

Most of us can remember where we were at the time, even though we live thousands of miles away. Pictures and news footage of that day will replay in our minds for the rest of our lives.

I was driving out of the church parking area of St Martin's in the Veld, Rosebank, JHB where we lived and I ministered at the time. I was on my way home to Julia and my newborn twins who were exactly 3 months' old that day, when a friend phoned to tell me about it. I pulled over to listen to him, and can remember my sense of horror as I got home and watched some of the drama unfold, thinking "what have we done, bringing children into this world?"

Other disasters before and since then have had larger loss of life. But this one affected us dramatically because it changed the world as we knew it. Not only because of the disastrous wars that followed and are still continuing, but because the destruction of the Twin Towers symbolised more than even 110 storey buildings.

They symbolised our society's capacity to achieve whatever it wanted to achieve. They stood as symbolic assurance of the supremacy of Western capitalism and democracy. Our confidence in the military supremacy of Western democracies, that we could always defend ourselves against attacks (and such confidence was great in the USA), was blown to smithereens when the towers were brought down. Dark and fearful times. Our world has seemed a lot less certain and secure since then.

We are not the first people in history to experience such an earth-shattering attack, one which causes a huge change to our world-view. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 AD had a similar impact on the people of that day.

Jesus predicted it, but by the time Luke wrote his account of Jesus' words, it had already happened, so the account gives us some sense of the way people were reacting. The temple dominated the Jerusalem skyline, just as surely as the twin towers did in New York City.

Luke describes what must have been a common scene: people walking around in the temple, marvelling at its scale and its grandeur. For the people of Jerusalem, the temple was a source of enormous pride. It was central to their whole sense of identity. "We live in God's own city, in sight of the Temple, the house of God. We are proud and confident. Surely nothing can ever destroy us, for God will let no harm come to his city and its inhabitants." But as the sightseers bask in the glory of the Temple, Jesus says, "These things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

Unthinkable. Unimaginable. And yet, less than forty years later, the previously unshakeable confidence in Jerusalem and its God was blown to smithereens when the Temple was brought down and the city sacked by the Roman army. Dark and fearful times. The world seemed a lot less certain and secure after that.

The towers and temples in which we put our trust and which symbolise our identity and security are not always built of stone and concrete and steel. And they do not always belong to a whole society or culture the way the Twin Towers or the Jerusalem Temple did. Most people have their own personal towers and temples too.

For some, it will be your job, or a particular position on the career ladder. You've worked hard to get there. It means the world to you. If asked about yourself, the first thing you talk about is your work. You're proud of what you do and where you've got to. It defines you and gives you a sense of purpose and place in the world. Because it is rock solid, you know your world is okay and nothing much could go wrong. But a dreadful day comes when not one stone is left upon another; all is thrown down. The company goes bankrupt and everyone is out of work, or you are retrenched, or you get sick or injured and are unable to return to work. Your whole world collapses. Not one stone is left upon another; all is thrown down.

For others, it will be some sure hope for your future, perhaps a dream of being married and having children of your own, or dreams for your family, or dreams for your retirement. There are plenty of other important things in your life, but the thing that really matters to you, the thing that really defines who you are and how you see yourself, is the confidence in your dream.

But a dreadful day comes when not one stone is left upon another; all is thrown down. Perhaps you marry and find yourselves unable to conceive. Perhaps you just wake up one day and realise that you're 43 and still single and even if you marry one day, the whole kids-of-your-own thing is out the window. Or things don't turn out for your children as you'd hoped and planned. Or your retirement funds are swallowed by an unscrupulous dealer in a scam. Your whole world collapses.

For others it will be health and fitness that stand as the assurance that all is well with your world and the future is bright. But one day the doctor says "Cancer!", and it's not one easily treated; or you are diagnosed with another illness for which there is no easy cure. A round of plastic surgery or doubling your gym routine is not going to make you look and feel 29 again. Not one stone is left upon another; all is thrown down.

For others it will be a "perfect" marriage that comes crashing down, through death or crisis, or perhaps it doesn't measure up to your dream marriage. Not one stone is left upon another; all is thrown down.

"As for these things that you see - these magnificent symbols of our success and accomplishment and security - the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." And they asked Jesus, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."

Jesus hasn't said there would be a sign, but those who hear him assume that there must be a sign, a warning. But Jesus doesn't offer them a sign. In fact he warns them that a preoccupation with warning signs would lead them astray. "Many will come claiming that they can read and interpret the signs. Don't go after them." Jesus does not call us all to be foretellers of the future. He calls us to avoid falling for false prophets. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about being able to predict the course of the future or read the supernatural signs. Nor is the gospel about securing our world so that towers and temples will not fall.

Rather, the gospel offers to empower us and gives us a context for our lives so that when the towers and temples do fall, even the ones we have erected for ourselves, we can endure and survive and find a way out of the rubble and on towards new life and new hope.

We can react to these predictions by getting caught up in speculation, or we can react as Jesus calls us to react, by living out the gospel even more boldly and courageously in the midst of the calamities that engulf our world. Jesus is quite clear that if we follow him, far from staying out of harm's way, we may attract hostility and suspicion.

If we stand aside from the great symbols our society erects and refuse to bow down to worship the great towers, or the great career paths, or the great dream families, or the celebrity perfect bodies, and instead set about loving the victims who stumble from the smoking rubble looking for a place of refuge and asylum, we may find hostile reactions.

But in the midst of such hostility, says Jesus, you will have the opportunity to testify, to bear witness to a life and a hope that is not bound up in towers and temples of our own making. Paradoxically he says, "You will be betrayed and hated and they will put some of you to death, but not a hair of your head will perish." You may be killed, but not harmed! "By your endurance you will gain your souls." He should know. He has endured all that too. He has been put to death and made even death the pathway to real life. And now as he warns us that we may face the same, he promises to be there with us when towers fall and hostilities break out. The one who knows what it is like will be there to see us through.

Towers and temples will fall. They have before and they will again. There is probably not one among you who will not know again the experience of your tower falling, your world falling apart; not one stone left on another as all is thrown down. The good news is not protection against that.

The good news is that towers and temples were not all they were cracked up to be in the first place, and that in their falling is the invitation to find the life and hope that will endure even when all is thrown down. For as many of us have experienced, it is when the towers fall that we see most clearly that only God's unshakeable love and towering compassion remain.

Though our world comes crashing down, we find ourselves falling into the loving hands of God, and if we can resist the temptation to quickly erect another tower, we can rest in those hands and find the life that really is life. Some of us have to learn that lesson several times, or we get caught up in the stampede to get another tower up to give us something to believe in.

Towers and temples will fall. Not one stone will be left upon another. But do not despair. Do not be terrified. For whether they stand or whether they fall they are little more than idols and distractions and false promises anyway; symbols of our delusion more than of our accomplishment. When nothing else stands, God's unshakeable love and towering compassion remain. Turn to them now and live. Turn to them now and know yourself beloved. Turn to them now and by your endurance, gain your souls.

*Adapted from a sermon on Luke 21:5-19 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 November 2007*  
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[Eucharistic prayers follow >>>]

## **THE GREAT THANKSGIVING**

### **The Lord be with you (usual words and responses, etc.)**

It is indeed right to give you our thanks and praise, O God,  
 for you invite us to draw deeply from your well of salvation.

You created heaven and earth as the first of your works  
 and chose a people to be your delight.  
 Though we marred your creation  
 with war and insurrection,  
 you have given us a vision of a day beyond the terrors:  
 a day when the sound of weeping will give way to delight,  
 when all creation will live in peace  
 and people will long enjoy the fruits of their labours.

In your child, Jesus the Christ,  
 you have begun the re-creation of all things.  
 When he was betrayed by friends,  
 arrested, persecuted,  
 and put to death,  
 you raised him to new life  
 and through him, you strengthen us  
 so that we might not grow weary in doing what is right  
 but through endurance, gain our souls.

*(Copyright 2001, Nathan Nettleton)*

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... And so, with all the choirs of angels in heaven  
we proclaim your glory and join in their unending hymn of praise:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might...  
Heaven and earth are full of Your glory  
Hosanna in the highest.  
Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Hosanna in the highest!**

#### **PRAYER OF CONSECRATION**

At this table we bear witness to the love  
which has been poured into our hearts and lives.  
We remember when Jesus washed his disciples' feet  
and sat down at a table to share the meal with them.

At that meal he took a loaf of bread,  
and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said,  
"This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying,  
"This cup is the new covenant in my blood.  
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,  
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

**Christ has come  
Christ is risen  
Christ will come again**

We remember and we give thanks for such outpouring of love.  
Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, O God,  
and upon these gifts of bread and wine,  
that they may be for us the body and blood of Christ - his life in us.

Renewed by his life and recreated in his image,  
we set our minds on fulfilling your purpose for us  
and this world of which we are a part.

In Jesus name we pray. AMEN.

*(Moiria Laidlaw, 2001.)*