

**GENERAL SYNOD CLOSING EUCHARIST
26 OCTOBER 2007
THE MOST REVD DR PHILLIP ASPINALL**

Romans 7.18-25a, Psalm 119.65-72, Luke 12.54-59

Were it not for the lectionaries I doubt anyone would land upon this passage for this occasion. It's not the happiest note on which to be drawing a General Synod to a conclusion. But it can't be avoided: Jesus gave numerous warnings about God's imminent judgement.

Israel, of course, **expected** a coming judgement and indeed looked forward to it believing that when God acted Israel itself would be vindicated and the judgement would fall on the other nations. Israel's enemies would be put down and Israel itself would be vindicated as God's chosen people. Not so says Jesus. The judgement will fall precisely on Israel itself and on Jerusalem in particular.

Jesus can see a national disaster looming: Rome will destroy the nation, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Rome was a brooding, threatening presence, that wouldn't think twice about crushing opposition brutally if occasion required. Bloody repression of political threats was a reality.

But that socio-political reality was invested with theological meaning by Jesus. The impending fate of Israel was seen not only as a result of political realities in relation to Rome but also as a result of Israel's faithlessness in relation to God.

This kind of thinking was familiar to the people of Israel. In the past, God had used political realities and Israel's opponents to deliver judgement against the people of God. The prophetic tradition is full of this dynamic.

And, to be clear, the coming judgement to which Jesus refers is not some ethereal event way off in the distance beyond space and time. It is imminent. He repeatedly refers to 'this generation.' He speaks about the signs of the times. He's talking about the **now** of his own day.

The long unfolding story of the people of Israel is coming to a climax, a devastating climax **now**. Jerusalem is subject to judgement (not her enemies). Pagan forces will be the instrument of God's judgement. The insiders, so convinced of their status and privilege before God, will find themselves on the outside.

This is the gist of Jesus' warning. The imminent devastation of the nation, the city and the temple is the reason she had to settle accounts quickly while there was still time. She had better learn the new way of people of

God before it was too late, which would be soon.

Reading the signs of the times, Jesus called the people of Israel to a different way, a way of peace and forgiveness – ‘forgive,’ otherwise ‘neither will your father forgive you’ (Mt 6.15); ‘Those who take the sword will die by the sword’ (Mt 26.52b); and so on.

‘To reject the way of Jesus was to choose the path leading directly to conflict with Rome and subsequent catastrophe’ (Caird, 1963, 169). And it wasn’t far away.

We’ve been cheered by Luke all this week in the Eucharistic readings. Luke 12 conveys on this theme the urgency through numerous images that run on quickly cascading over each other:

‘The master of this house is coming and servants who are unready for him will be put the unfaithful [the outsiders] (12.35-46).... From now on there will be division within Israel (12.49-53), while her citizens, not reading the signs of the times, do not recognise that her hour has come (12.54-56). If they did they would come to terms with their enemies now, rather than risk total ruin (12.57-59)’ (Wright 1996,331).

These sayings which Luke brought together are not a collection of timeless moral aphorisms about how to live personal life prudently. They are a clear warnings to the people of God that they need to rediscover their shared vocation before it is too late.

As I say a salutary passage, but what possible application could a passage like this have to the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia – The idea that God would use political realities to deliver judgement? A summons to the people of God to be faithful to their true vocation? And a question about whether we are reading accurately the signs of the times?

What possible relevance?

Last week Jill Rowbotham (2007, 12), the religious affairs writer for The Australian newspaper gave an account of a recently published book that is quite confronting.

“Both clergy and laity have a poor understanding of Anglicanism, and in many places commitment to the church is weak and faltering.” Highly critical of the infighting between the church factions – evangelical, liberal and Anglo-Catholic Anglicans, “need to develop and retain a clear focus on the world and its redemption rather than focusing on the church and its structures.”

That assertion doesn’t stop the author, though, from making some

observations of his own about church structures, referring to the primacy and the General Synod office as “organizationally weak and seriously under funded. The church lacks organizational maturing and a capacity to display trust in its Episcopal leaders,” which encourages, “the election of managers rather than visionaries, administrators rather than prophets.”

Structures are not the only shortcoming. There is also “an inability of the church’s leadership to exploit the opportunities presented by the secular media for the propagation of religious ideas” and a “political naivety among the churches’ leaders that is matched by a lack of theological sophistication.”

Incoherence rather than extinction is the judgement pronounced.

“In a generation’s time, the Anglican church of Australia will continue to exist as a national entity, although it will remain internally fractured by theological differences entrenched in diocesan identities.” Opinions will differ and widely about what weight to place on these particular assertions and on the book as a whole.

What struck me about the newspaper article were echoes of the passage from Luke.

Echoes of –

The idea that God would use political realities to deliver judgment?

A summons to the people of God to be faithful to their true vocation?

A questioning about whether we are reading accurately the signs of the times? These are salutary questions.

Is it the case that the way we have gone and are going about living out the life of the Anglican church of Australia is a recipe for incoherence and ineffectiveness?

Were the marks of mission of the international Anglican Communion to be the focus for all we do, how would the life of our church be different? What changes would allow virtually all our time and attention and resources to be focused on being the healing, reconciling presence of Christ in the world?

God is acting to usher in a new heaven and a new earth – a new era that dawned in Jesus Christ. Have we turned aside from our own agenda and come on board with his? That is to say, “have we repented and believed the good news?”

A Primate wouldn’t dare utter such harsh words to his own people. Jesus himself is not so reticent: ‘You hypocrites. You know how to read the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?’

Caird, G.B.
1963 Saint Luke. Penguin Books.
Rowbotham, J.

2007 'Anglicans to change "or risk anarchy"', The Australian, October 17 2007, p.12.

Wright, N.T.

1996 Jesus and the Victory of God. Fortress Press.