

PORTSMOUTH DIOCESAN SYNOD

SATURDAY 04 NOVEMBER 2017

We live, it seems, in apocalyptic times – and I am not referring to the absence of Bishop Christopher on his Extended Study Leave! In recent weeks we have been subjected to the rhetoric and blustering threats which the US President and the President of N. Korea employ against each other. Competitive stags in the rutting season of political bombast, they boast of the fearful damage each could do to the other with the unthinkable, destructive power of their nuclear arsenals. “Wars and rumours of wars” (Mark 13:7), continuing terrorist atrocities set against the backdrop of an interminably slow, complex and, in my own view, suicidal outworking of the Brexit process: we live in anxious times.

During November and December, in the Church’s seasons of the Kingdom and Advent, we hear in the lections from those Scriptures which contain apocalyptic style language. As we know, apocalypse is about revealing God’s reign, God’s way of being, God’s loving intention for the real fulfilment of human well-being in the face of our arrogant human attempts to build our own kingdoms. The language can be dramatic, the imagery powerful, but all designed to shake us out of any complacency that leads us to suppose that life will inevitably go on in the same old way. The message is ultimately about hope and the promise of a fresh start where there is true repentance. Yes, there is judgment too, but it is God who is the merciful and compassionate judge. What a contrast with what we hear on the news!

Yet it is the world that sets our agenda and we, the Church, the People of God, are called to remind the world of the transcendent value of humanity in God’s eyes. If the world’s gods are money, power, selfish gain, and an insatiable appetite for the catalogue of human tragedy, folly, evil and disaster, which comprise our news, then our response must be to remind the world of God’s justice, peace and loving power that brings true human blessing and flourishing – even if it is only two minutes and fifty seconds in Thought for the Day.

There is at present considerable hostility to the concept of “religion” from some quarters. There is a natural revulsion at what is apparently done in religion’s name around the world from the extremist savage violence of Isis/Daesh to the Buddhist inspired persecution of Rohingya Muslims, not to mention the way that the recent celebration of 500 years since the Reformation has reminded us of the mutual bloody wars between Catholics and Protestants. All this in religion’s name; so extremism is taken to be the norm for religion: it is narrow, blind, over-zealous, fanatical and hypersensitive, seeking to impose its will and perception of the truth upon others. But true religion cannot be so. *“He came as Saviour to his own, the way of love he trod; he came to win men by good will, for force is not of God” (Epistle to Diognetus 2nd century).*

God’s Kingdom is always coming, always on the threshold, always breaking through. It’s not about some indefinite future. It comes with us and in us. In our ministry to others and in our personal life we continue to have the opportunity to reveal the truth about God’s Kingdom and Peace. That peace may indeed pass human understanding, but it is about the transformation of hearts and minds capturing a vision of life which the prophets of old hold out to us (e.g. Micah 4: 1-4). We shall soon be reminded at Remembrance services of these words: *“The Lord shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.”*

May God bless you and yours in these coming days and fill your lives with a true sense of peace in our loving God.

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