

Endure to the end of the age.

This last week I attended some training about deliverance ministry, that is, what a priest is to do when faced with complaints of ghosts and ghouls, things that go bump in the night, and even possession and exorcism; yes, all things that priests do still sometimes face, but things that all sound far more dramatic and exciting than they actually are in reality.

The training began with a quote from C.S Lewis, author of the Narnia series, in the preface to his book 'The Screwtape letters.' A fictional and humorous account of a more experienced demon, giving advice to a rookie demon about how best to disrupt and lead astray new Christians. The quote is this:

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall into about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. [The demons] Themselves are equally pleased by both errors.”

With all that has been going on in these last few weeks, I believe this quote might have more to say to us this morning than only an expression of two opposing Christian beliefs about demons.

A few weeks ago, Donald Trump was appointed for the second time as President of the United States. This last week, Archbishop Justin Welby resigned.

Both of these things monumental events in the world and the church. I do not know how you are feeling about them – are you ambivalent, detached? Deeply enraged, ready to shout, march upon Lambeth palace, or leave the church? Saddened – worried for all that the future holds here and abroad?

Perhaps it has stirred up past hurts for you personally, either by the abuse in the church, or the way in which religion can be used to justify actions and beliefs. If this is the case, please, please, do come and speak to us – myself, or any of the clergy and cathedral team are here for you.

But whatever our reactions to all of this, I believe we should keep in mind the two errors of thought that C.S Lewis mentioned earlier - disbelief, or excessive and unhealthy interest. And so we turn to our Gospel reading today to explore this.

Jesus has just left the temple, and as he does so, one of the disciples' comments about the scale and wonder of the Temple building, something which we can only imagine, but perhaps a cathedral comes about as close as it gets for us. But Jesus replies with 'not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down.'

A little later they are sat on the mount of olives, opposite the temple, gazing down upon it, and the disciples of course want to know – when will the temple fall? How? What are the signs?

The disciples' very belief, their experience of forever, has been rocked. In a similar way that our life experiences might rock our own foundational beliefs – the sea does not always stay in its bounds, sometimes it floods and causes chaos and destruction; the earth does not always stay still; people do not always make good decisions; leaders, partners, friends, can let us down, – the temple will not always be there.

It is disconcerting. It is coming face to face not only with our own mortality, which we might be able to accept, but the mortality of the things that we take for granted. It is a step back from the day-to-day life we are accustomed to, and a look at a future much more unsure and beyond our control. It is a look at the end of things. For Jesus in this passage, it is a look at the true end of things.

But with every end, comes a new beginning. Though the disciples were rocked by this message of apocalyptic destruction, Jesus tells them not to be alarmed, 'these are but the beginning of the birth pangs.' Birth pangs, because at the end comes a new beginning – that of salvation.

The issue that humanity has had over the ages is that true salvation has often been conflated with a particular cause. The same can be seen here – when Mark wrote his Gospel, though we're not exactly sure when, the temple would either have already been destroyed, or its destruction may have been a looming inevitability in the near future.

Because there was a war, the Jewish Roman War, which aimed to restore the Davidic kingdom. Jews, including Mark and his audience, were being rallied to join the battle that would bring in the end of the age and the salvation of God's people. The restoration of the temple – a return to independence of the temple! Yet, it is in this war that the temple is destroyed.

The goals of this cause are worthy, but are they God's ultimate goals?

Many times throughout history we see causes being championed as ushering in salvation, a completely new world – if only this person were no longer in control, or if this one was. If only the church could get it together on this issue, help this group of people, stop those people.

Don't mishear me friends, some of these causes are worthy, vital even to the work of God. Many human rights and civil issues have been hard won by those, Christian and non-Christian alike pushing for change. This very Cathedral has been at the heart of some of these. But others are harmful, and we must beware those who would lead us astray.

And more importantly for us today, those changes do not offer a quick fix overnight of ushering in the kingdom of God. Salvation is a long, sometimes hard process of repentance, forgiveness and new birth. And as any mother will know, these birth pangs bringing in this new age can be long, painful, and drawn out.

As the church looks again at its safeguarding procedures, the new Archbishop, whoever they will be, will not solve the problem on their own. To continue to create an environment where all are safe will need everyone, ourselves included, to be onboard. To be able to pick ourselves, dusty on the ground, up again, and keep on. Not to run, but to face it.

To do our safeguarding courses without complaint, to give feedback on safeguarding courses, to be courageous enough to speak out when needed, even against those with power, authority or supposed wisdom.

Not to error, as C.S Lewis put it, either by believing there is no problem, or by an excessive and unhealthy pinpointing of the issue in this one place.

In the US, not to be silent when religion is used to justify control and oppression and believe there is no problem, but also by remembering, praying and for working for the time that comes after.

What is essential, is that the hope of those with faith in God remains, that in this meantime they may have strength to show love where others show hatred, and that we do not become so excessively focused on this now that we forget that Salvation will not be thwarted in this short space of time for a God of eternity.

And so we finish back with my training on deliverance ministry. Perhaps the thing that most stands out is that deliverance ministry is nothing how it is portrayed by media (like anything is!) Far from dramatic prayers, usually in Latin, while swinging a cross wildly around while flames shoot out, (cool though that sounds!)

It is instead often meeting with those who need medical support, directing them to that support, praying quiet and uneventful prayers with people. Jesus himself, when we are told stories of his banishing of demons, makes no big show of it, but quite simply, quietly, blesses the person, or tells the demon to leave.

True salvation, true change, doesn't always look flashy. It is a long, arduous process that takes time and work. Our job, as Matthew puts it, is to 'endure to the end of the age.' To keep faithfully serving and living as Jesus instructed even when our beliefs and understanding of the world is shattered, even when the temple we once awed at has crumbled, even when we or others have failed.

We trust in God who was there at the beginning, and will be there at the end, and endure those birth pangs, until the new age is come.

Amen.

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