

Expecto Patronum!

A sermon on Luke 21:25-36 & Jeremiah 33:14-16 by Nathan Nettleton, 28 November 2021

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Message

Jesus calls us to be alert for his salvific coming in the midst of the terrors of the here and now, not just in the past and future.

Sermon

One of the difficulties many people have with the Christian faith, as they have been taught it, is that it seemed to have plenty to offer in the past and it promises plenty in the future, but it doesn't seem to have much help to offer in the midst of the struggles of day to day life in the here and now.

We read stories of the early church and it sounds as though people were immediately set on fire with the Holy Spirit in ways that healed all their illnesses and brokenness and filled them with courage and power to do amazing things in the face of overwhelming odds. And we are left wondering why it seldom, if ever, seems to be that way for us.

Perhaps too we hear about the promises of the coming of the Kingdom of God. We are thrilled by the vision of a world in which the enemies of life are defeated and there is justice and peace and plenty for all, and God wipes away every tear from our eyes and welcomes us to the great banquet of life. But in the midst of trying to hold your life together in the here and now, promises of how it will all be one day can seem like little more than an escapist fantasy, they might numb the pain a bit, but they don't make much difference to anything real.

This season of Advent calls us to prepare ourselves in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. In part it is a preparation for the season of Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Jesus as a human baby some twenty centuries ago. But you probably noticed that today's readings said nothing at all about that. Advent always kicks off with a set of readings that call us to look forward to the coming of the Messiah in glory to put all things right, and so in our gospel reading tonight we heard Jesus promising that we will see the New Human coming on a cloud with power and great glory.

But if those two things are what Advent is all about, then doesn't it just compound the problem I spoke about a minute ago? Doesn't it just end up offering us sweet sentiments about the past, and pie in the sky when we die, and leave us with very little of any practical use for the living of our lives in the here and now?

It seems to me that part of the reason we've got ourselves into such dead end thinking is that we've partially fallen for the message peddled by the doomsday fanatics, and heard Jesus's apocalyptic descriptions of global chaos as a single defined future event, connected only to the great and final coming of the Messiah in glory. We inadvertently join them in concluding that although various earthquakes, tsunamis, wars, plagues, and disasters sounded like the sort of apocalyptic chaos that Jesus foreshadowed, they can't have been the ones he was talking about after all, because they've come and gone and faded from memory, and the "second coming" still hasn't occurred.

In tonight's gospel reading, we hear Jesus speak of how "people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world", and it sounds just like a description of our own world, beset by the fear and foreboding of pandemic and climate crisis, but we don't feel any closer to the kingdom being fulfilled on earth as in heaven. We hear Jesus say that reading the signs of the times is just like predicting the onset of summer by watching the flowers bloom, but time after time those who thus predict the end of the world and the coming of the kingdom have been disappointed, and we stop listening and watching.

But perhaps we have been far too one dimensional in our reading of these passages and in our understanding of the message of this Advent season. Perhaps we've been mistaken to think that the terrors Jesus pointed too were not the terrors we face. And perhaps we've been mistaken to push our expectations for the coming of the Messiah into the past and the future.

There is no doubt that the first hearers of these words from Jesus understood the apocalyptic descriptions to refer to that chaos that was going on in their world at the time, and to the fear and foreboding that was gripping them and those around them in their day. So perhaps Jesus is not only referring to one specific period in the future somewhere. Perhaps he is also calling us to expect the Messiah to come to us with real help in the midst of what we face now and to be ready for what he will do among us and through us now.

One of the Harry Potter books, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, provides a powerful image that I think relates strongly to this idea. There are of course a few Christians who think we should ban Harry Potter, because they see it as being about witchcraft, but for some reason the similarities in the Narnia Chronicles don't bother them. The Harry Potter stories are just as capable of a Christian reading.

In the The Prisoner of Azkaban, Harry is being being threatened by dementors. Listen to how one of his teachers describes them:

Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles (that us non-magical humans) feel their presence, though they can't see them. Get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the Dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself...soul-less and evil. You will be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. (p. 187)

The people Jeremiah was preaching to in our first reading felt like they'd been done over by dementors. Marched into exile, with their homeland destroyed, they felt like every good feeling and happy memory was being drained out of them. It felt as though the air they breathed was lifeless and hopeless.

When Luke recorded the words we heard from Jesus, the Romans had sacked Jerusalem and the temple was in ruins and people were again feeling like they had been attacked by dementors. And today, even among those who have not been personally touched by tsunamis or wars or devastating droughts or terrorist attacks, many people know that feeling only too well.

Not only have the restrictions of the pandemic been crushing for many people, but even before the pandemic, depression was apparently in epidemic proportions in western society. We might not see the dementors, but we know that soulless lifeless feeling when all the colour and hope seems to empty from our world and leave us cold and terrified. J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, has said that the idea for the dementors came from her own struggles with depression. But even those of us who would not be diagnosed as suffering depression know that there are times when it seems that dementors are bearing down on us.

Because of the threat of the dementors, one of Harry Potter's teachers, Professor Lupin, sets out to teach him the only defence there is against them – the Patronus Charm, which he describes as “a kind of anti-dementor – a guardian that acts as a shield between you and the dementors” (p. 237). In order to activate the patronus charm, Harry has to concentrate all his might, on the strongest and happiest memory he possesses, and then call out the words, “Expecto patronum!”

Significant words, those. They sound much like an Advent prayer, because they literally mean “expect the help of your father, your guardian.”

At the crucial moment, when Harry and his wounded godfather are about to be destroyed by a swarm of dementors, he is able to cry out, “Expecto patronum!” and from his wand comes a dazzling, brilliant light in the form of a great stag that charges at the dementors, who flee before its light. The one powerful happy memory that Harry was able to focus into the patronus charm was the memory of being greatly loved by his father and mother, who had died to save his life when he was a baby. It was holding fiercely to the knowledge of that love that drove away the dementors.

Jesus says, “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the New Human coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The “end times” experience is not just a special time in the future. It has happened before and will happen again, but it is also in the midst of the terrors and turmoil and struggles of now. Yes, there will be a time when everything is fulfilled, but the experience of the one who comes then is an experience we are to expect and look for now. Expecto Patronum! Expect the help of the Messiah now! The messiah who was crucified, and the messiah who will come to make all things new, and the messiah who comes to drive off our dementors and lift our heads now, are all the same messiah, with the same love and the same commitment to us.

But just as Harry found it enormously difficult to summon the patronus charm, so we must recognise how fiercely determined we will often need to be to recognise and access the help the messiah offers to us.

I have heard people in this congregation, beset by dementors, complain that they never experience God's closeness and they never experience any community or support in this congregation, when I know for a fact that they have been a dinner guest of another member of the congregation within the last week.

As Alison used to remind us, we often resist recognising what God gives us because we are trapped in futile wishes that God would offer it to us in some other form. We are easy prey for the dementors when we cling to one fixed expectation of what the help should look like and refuse to see any help that doesn't match our wishes.

When it feels as though something is draining peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around you, and every good feeling and every happy memory is being sucked out of you, cling fiercely to a good experience, a good memory. Cling fiercely to the knowledge that you are loved by one who gives his life to save yours. Focus all your energy on that knowledge and cry out to God. Expect the help of your Father, your messiah. But know that the light that comes may come as quietly and unobtrusively as the birth of a baby in a shed in some far flung place. But the light comes. Expecto Patronum! The light comes.

The idea for the major Harry Potter illustration in this sermon came from a sermon by Bass Mitchell of <http://www.homiliesbyemail.com>