

When you Hear of Wars and Insurrections

A sermon on Isaiah 65:17-25 & Luke 21:5-19 by Nathan Nettleton, 13 November 2022

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Message

The global social breakdown of which Jesus speaks is caused by the failure of our old oppressive ways of maintaining peace, but God has promised us a better way on the other side.

Sermon

I don't know if this is your experience too, but I often find that when I watch the news on TV or plow through the newspaper over breakfast, I find myself being thrown helplessly back and forth between joyous hope and utter despair, between enthusiastic optimism and a dark pit of hopelessness.

One minute I'm lapping up a story about coral reefs showing new signs of rejuvenation, or an organic dairy farm that's bringing back re-usable glass bottles, or same-sex marriage being legalised in Cuba and Mexico, or a medical science breakthrough that promises to be a game changer for people with some serious degenerative condition, and the next minute I'm drowning in stories about barbaric attacks on civilians by the military regime in Burma, or the likely failure of the world to meet even grossly inadequate emissions reduction targets, or another Aboriginal death in custody, or about the growing likelihood of the United States of America spiralling into another violent civil war. This morning it was a tragic news that the Baptist Assembly gathering in New South Wales yesterday voted to go ahead with expelling churches and pastors who support same sex marriage.

One minute the future is looking bright; the next minute it is looking terrifyingly non-existent.

Reading tonight's Bible passages was a bit like that too.

From the prophet Isaiah we heard a wonderful vision of the new world that God is promising to create; a world in which weeping and distress are things of the past, a world in which everyone lives to a healthy old age, a world in which homelessness, wage theft, and labour exploitation are done away with and everyone has their own house, and a fruitful garden, and meaningful, properly paid work. The vision reaches its climax with a picture of world peace extending even to the animal kingdom where the wolf and the lamb will feed together. Bring it on! Come, Lord Jesus!

But then, in the words of Jesus himself in the gospel reading, we heard warnings of doom and disaster. National monuments of political and religious stability will be torn down. Devious charismatic leaders will come speaking lies, and the people will be sucked into following them. Wars, insurrections, extreme climate events causing devastation, and violent social breakdown where everyone seems to be turning on everyone. The whole world turning to shit, and that's not even the end of it, says Jesus.

Last week I had a great chat with Chris, up there in Armadale – Hi Chris! – and he said to me, “I don't think I even like Jesus after reading some of the dark and heavy stuff he has to say in the gospels.” And this week, reading these words from Jesus, I'm feeling pretty sympathetic to Chris's misgivings about him. If I can choose between the wolf and lamb

feeding safely together and “not one stone left upon another”, I’ll take the wolf and the lamb every time thank you.

But of course, as much as I’d like the news to be more wolf-feeding-with-the-lamb too, I’d also like it to be giving me an accurate understanding of the world I have to live and work in, and “not one stone left upon another” may be the unpleasant reality of the state of things.

As I said to Chris, it is helpful to remind ourselves that many of the heavy things that Jesus is reported to have said did not originate with him. Often he is quoting things from popular stories of the time, or even from the news of the day, and then adding something of his own interpretation to them. But we are not as familiar as his first hearers with the original versions, so while what they noticed was the ways he tweaked the stories or applied them in new ways, we tend to just hear the whole thing as a single statement instead of as part of a conversation with the prevailing stories and opinions.

The heavy stuff we heard from him tonight is a case in point. These kind of apocalyptic prophecies were super popular in his day, and Jesus engaged with them quite often. And if you study what Jesus does with them, one of the ways he subverts them is to attribute the doomsday scenarios to human violence instead of to divine anger. It was very common for the apocalyptic stories of that time to portray these scenes as God pouring out wrath on the world and punishing the enemies of God’s people. Jesus edits the stories in new and surprising ways.

These are stories about us, and what we are doing to the world. Besides, in Jerusalem in the first century, with Jewish terrorist cells constantly sparking rebellions against the infinitely more powerful Roman occupation forces, betting that they’d end up getting their temple demolished and their city destroyed was not exactly backing long odds. It wasn’t many years later that exactly that happened, and it didn’t require any doomsday intervention of God to bring it about. If you’d been reading the newspapers, you could have seen it coming.

So Jesus was not even making a surprise prediction, let alone a statement of what God wanted to do or see. But he was offering an interpretation of what was going on and giving some guidance for how to live faithfully in the midst of it without getting sucked into it. And he was certainly advising against the all-too-common religious practice of trying to read world events as some kind of prophetic code that would reveal what God was going to do next.

Although much of the imagery Jesus uses in these apocalyptic visions was actually current affairs in the first century, that doesn’t mean it has nothing to say to us. It probably would if you were just looking for a prophecy of something that was going to happen – sure enough it happened, and that’s now a long time ago. But much of what Jesus described – wars and insurrections and pandemics and extreme climate catastrophes and state sponsored persecution of dissidents – sounds like not much has changed, and so Jesus’s guidance for how to understand such times and live faithfully through them still has plenty to offer us in our day.

One thing it does not offer us though is any justification for the way many Christians are currently bleating about being persecuted. Yes, Jesus did say in this passage that his followers would face persecution, and that certainly happened in the first century and has happened again numerous times down through the centuries. In some parts of the world it is happening

now. But the legalisation of same-sex marriage is not persecution of Christians! It's democracy. Being laughed at or disregarded for believing weird stuff and being obnoxious in public is not persecution. These snowflakes need to get over themselves!

The kind of persecution Jesus is talking about is when Christians get blamed for the wars and plagues and insurrections and extreme climate catastrophes and dragged into the courts or lynched in the streets. Whenever things go seriously wrong, people look for someone to blame, and there is, in fact, some truth in blaming Jesus and his followers for some of the social breakdown we are seeing in our generation.

Throughout history, times of peace and stability have always had a dark underside. The so-called peace of Rome was imposed on the empire and backed up by garrisons of soldiers armed and ready to deal with any dissenters. So too in many parts of the world today. Much of this country's supposed peace and stability have been built on stolen lands and the impoverishment and incarceration of those we dispossessed. Even the supposedly stable institution of marriage and family was often maintained by the brutal marginalisation of LGBTIQ+ people and divorcees and anyone else who didn't conform. Someone was always paying a terrible price for our "peace and stability".

The escalating social chaos and breakdown we are seeing around our world now is what happens when those old brutal ways of maintaining stability don't work anymore but we refuse to let go of them. The reason they don't work anymore is in large part because Jesus and his followers have unmasked their dark underside and exposed the lies of our "peace".

Jesus consistently refused to collude with the powers of his day to maintain a peace that had losers. He hung on to the vision we heard from Isaiah, the vision of a world in which there are no losers, and everyone can have their own house and garden and meaningful work without being exploited or rejected or scapegoated. And by shining a searchlight on every failure of our systems to live up to that vision, he fractured our faith in the systems and crippled them.

He showed us an alternative, a better way, but the human race has as yet been unable to contemplate putting into practice his pathway of renouncing retaliation and embracing radical forgiveness and the generous love of enemies. Unwilling to go there, we've tried to crank back up the old ways, but they are fatally broken. We can't un-see the injustice Jesus has unmasked, so unanimous trust in the system is no longer possible, and the system can no longer resolve our conflicts.

In America that breakdown has got to the stage where trust in the basic institutions of democracy such as election results has collapsed, and where the population is increasingly split down the middle into two identity tribes who see each other as the embodiment of evil and who can't accept the concept of a safe moral world in which the other has a right to exist. Here in Australia, our electoral system is a lot more robust and transparent, so it seems likely to hold, but otherwise we are probably just a decade or so behind in the culture wars that divide us into ideologically opposed tribes who end up reframing each other as reviled enemies whose presence in our world we find intolerable. Not one stone will be left on another.

Many people, including many Christians, imagine that the hatred they receive from the other side is what Jesus was talking about when he said, "You will be hated by all because of my name." Mostly it's not. Mostly what he was talking about was the hatred you receive from your own side, from your parents and siblings and relatives and friends, when you stand with Jesus in insisting on loving those on the other side and treating them with dignity and respect and a willingness to listen. It is the hatred you get from your allies when you pray that Isaiah's vision might be fulfilled for your opponents. It is the hatred you get from the lambs when your vision of the perfect future isn't the extinction of the wolves, but the Eucharistic picture of lambs and wolves dining together in peace.

For the immediate foreseeable future, the daily news is going to continue to toss us back and forth between the peaceful and prosperous vision of Isaiah and the hard apocalyptic reality check we heard from Jesus. And the challenge for us is to not flee into one or the other, but to hold on to both as Jesus did. That means standing firm in the midst of the apocalyptic chaos and hostility, and continuing to lovingly pray that the light of that beautiful vision of peace might dawn not just for you and your friends but equally for those who oppose you and hate you.

That's not fun. It's not easy. But it is the pathway of Jesus, of the gospel, of the salvation of the world. Jesus was crucified for that pathway. You might be too. By your endurance you will gain your souls, said Jesus. Who knows how long our apocalyptic self-destruction will last? Jesus dissuades us from even speculating on that. But the promise of Isaiah's vision still stands, and Jesus refused to sell it out for some crass imitation with a dark underside and a trail of losers. That beautiful vision is coming, still beckoning us from beyond the chaos, and for the coming of that day on this, we work and pray.