

Sermon preached in St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, 29th November 2015, by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary: Jeremiah: 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36.

1st Sunday in Advent, St Andrew's Day with the Kirkin' o' the Tartan

God Is Coming

“A Wake Up call.” Ross Gittins in Sydney Morning Herald 25th November wrote that, rather than chalking the word “*Eternity*” in copperplate all over Sydney pavements, he would chalk “*Wake Up*.” An apt call for First Sunday in Advent, St Andrew's Day and “Kirkin' o' the Tartan.” “Wake up for God is Coming!” An apocalyptic call.

“When all of this starts happening, stand up straight and be brave. You will soon be set free.”

Apocalyptic regards things from a cosmic perspective. Full of dramatic and frightening imagery and statements. Designed to “wake up” its listeners. Like bagpipes, loud, demanding attention. It knows we are all fast asleep. Alarm bells must be rung!

Ross Gittins sounds alarm bells about budget and financial shenanigans, saying “Do you realise the direction toward which we are being pushed by vested interests, corporations and the already rich?” The gospel echoes Jesus' warnings of the dire consequences of sleep-walking. His message: “Wake Up!” “The day is here, God Is Coming. Right now!”

In waiting for Messiah to come, we push God out of the Now and put God on a long finger. Jesus says, “God is here, Immanuel. God is with us.” When we say, in Advent, “We are preparing for God to come,” Jesus says right back, “Surprise! God is here before you have time to prepare! You're in for a shock. God comes like a burglar in the night, while you're asleep, getting ready for next day!”

The day of the Lord is like that. Always a surprise, when you think that you are safe, secure and settled. The day of judgement, of decision, of redemption, of being set free is suddenly upon us!

That realisation, I suspect, is the basis for the wearing of the tartan to the Kirk. Scots, oppressed by the English, betrayed by some of their own countrymen, knew they had to seize the promise of being set free from restrictions placed upon them. “Today is day of salvation, of judgement, of decision, of resurrection.”

How one feels about the “Day of the Lord” depends on where one stands. If you an oppressor, you will regard the day with apprehension, because you believe that power, wealth and life-style are going to be taken away. The English must have been apprehensive when they realised that they couldn't finally subdue the Scottish. But the oppressed eagerly await the “Day of the Lord.”

Oppressors of Afro-Americans were dismayed when Martin Luther King delivered his apocalyptic address, “*I have a dream...*” Afro-Americans were delighted. Reformer, Martin Luther, shook the foundations of the Roman Church with an apocalyptic message. His theses against Indulgences disrupted religion, political alignments, and changed economic and social structures.

During last century, the day of judgement, the day of the Lord, the sounding of the call to be set free, shook the colonial empires that European nations had built up. The emerging nations that came out of that shake-up are still trying to find their feet and their voice in the modern world.

The road has been, and is, tough. The struggle for justice and equality had many costly set-backs, in Asia, Africa and South America. “*The Wretched of the Earth*” was a book published in 1961 by Afro-Caribbean doctor, Frantz Fanon, Algerian freedom fighter and analyst. It analysed the fierce struggles amongst various groups, fighting each other and colonisers for power in emerging nations.

Earlier I said, that the response to the announcement that today is the “Day of the Lord” depends on where we stand, what we think we may have to gain or lose. Scots always want independence, as do the Irish and Welsh.

Customs, traditions, clothing, food, music and songs are preserved as a sign of standing up straight and being brave. All groups within large federations do the same. Even in Australia, with our States. We think also of Germany, Russia, China, India, and so on.

Apocalyptic talk once seemed a bit weird, but now it seems more apt than we would want it to be. *“Strange things will happen to the sun, moon and stars. The nations on earth will be afraid of the roaring seas and tides, and they won't know what to do.”*

“People will be so frightened that they will faint because of what is happening to the world. Every power in the sky will be shaken. Then the Son of Man will be seen, coming in a cloud with great power and glory.” (C E V Luke 21:25-27)

Decisions have to be made about rising temperatures and seas. Global warming is on every nation's agenda. Levels of conflict and war in many nations, and in Syria, have escalated. Powerful nations are inescapably involved. France, Russia, Turkey, the NATO coalition, the United States. *“Roaring seas and tides”* is an image of the forces shaping modern politics.

Jesus' word about all this addresses the fear brought on by the shaking of the foundations. *“When all of this starts happening, stand up straight and be brave. You will soon be set free.”*

When we talk of freedom, being set free, we remind ourselves that to “be set free” equates with “be responsible.” *“We must walk this lonesome valley, We have to walk it by ourselves, O, nobody else can walk it for us, We have to walk it by ourselves.”* That is freedom and responsibility.

The free person is the responsible person. The responsible person is the free person. The Statue of Liberty on the east coast needs to be balanced on the west coast by a Statue of Responsibility.

That is a way of talking about the “Day of the Lord.” To be aware that now is the time to make the decision to do the necessary deeds. To bring God's justice and kindness to this confused and troubled world. A world that is waiting with longing, yearning for a new day. Romans 8:19 puts it this way: *“In fact, all creation is eagerly waiting for God to show who his children are.”*

Paul goes on to speak of *“the hope that creation would be set free from decay and would share in the glorious freedom of his children.”* The glorious responsibility of being part of a new creation.

The earliest piece of writing in the New Testament is the *“Letter to Thessalonians.”* Before gospels were written, Paul was writing to his congregations. These writings have the style of apocalyptic, “End Times, Day of the Coming of the Lord.”

But Paul also speaks movingly of his love for them and how his love has grown. He prays: *“May the Lord make your love for each other and for everyone else grow by leaps and bounds.”* Imagine those words addressed to you and me. What an affirmation of reality and possibility!

Imagine, then, those words addressed to people of Russia and Turkey, to people of France, and Syria, to various Arab and Middle Eastern countries and those of Africa and South America and Asia. A pressing challenge!

They are, in fact apocalyptic challenge. Words apt for Advent Sunday, for St Andrew, who went out to find his brother “Rocky,” to bring him to the Lord. Apt words to describe the spirit of “Kirkin' o' the Tartan.” Defiant Scots are saying “We pray, live and dream for a new day. We see beyond the tragedy of the present, the nightmare. We have hope beyond the pain.

Be awake. Look beyond the heartbreak of destruction. Work and hope for a new creation, where the Lord makes *“your love for each other and for everyone else grow by leaps and bounds.”* *“When all of this starts happening, stand up straight and be brave. You will soon be set free.”* *“And the Son of Man will be pleased with you.”*