

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Apocalypse and hope at a time of terrible news

2 before Advent B

Nov. 18th, 2018

Hebrews 10.11-14, 19-25

Mark 13.1-8

Isn't the news terrible? I can think of scarcely any item from the last few weeks which is positive, though I suppose there must be a few. But the big, headline news is almost entirely negative – parliament and government in disarray, with no way forward which will evidently solve our problems; the nation deeply divided about the major constitutional, international, social and economic issue of our time; the dire warnings of the International Panel on Climate Change, sitting alongside the fact that the leader of the most powerful nation on earth has withdrawn that country from any international effort to respond to those warnings; the election of a president in a huge country like Brazil containing the earth's largest green lung, who takes a similar view to the American president; carnage continuing in Yemen and Syria; violence and hatred in Gaza and the Israeli territory bordering it once again; a woman freed from prison in Pakistan after years of being held there under a charge of blasphemy against the prophet Muhammed – released, and acquitted, but not free to come out of hiding lest she's torn limb from limb by a mob, and banned by the government itself from taking refuge in another country; our own country – once so proud of its welfare state – berated by a UN rapporteur (and an Australian, at that) for policies which

have led to huge amounts of sheer destitution among our neighbours....And all this isn't to mention the wildfires and their horrific death toll in California, or that so-called 'caravan' of migrants, largely women and children fleeing violence, extreme poverty, and the effects of climate change, , coming up through Mexico, shortly to run up against a wall of American soldiers... What will happen then?

Well, I could go on. And so could you. Whenever you turn on the News, it's terrible. Some of us may enjoy the cut and thrust of politics, and have a strange fascination for the question as to whether Mrs May can survive as prime minister' his may keep us watching and listening. – but behind this human drama, we know that massive issues lie, whose outcomes will affect our future and the future of all our children and grandchildren, in ways which aren't at all clear.

What do you do when so much of the news is bad. Unlike the people of Jesus' day, we don't live with mere rumours of war far away: we can live if we choose, with footage which is live, or almost live. Death and disaster can come right into our sitting rooms, even while we eat our evening meal.

What do we do?

Do we turn off – literally and metaphorically? Do we switch channels and concentrate our minds on what is local and personal, as if these wider issues might not affect us all? Do we seek more and more entertainment, to drown out the worries?

That's one approach. And, of course, there's nothing wrong with throwing ourselves into the local, caring about our families and having a bit of fun. Indeed, all those things are part of a balanced life, and ways in which we can make a positive difference for other people, too.

But I want to suggest that concentrating just on those issues, people and places which seem manageable – where we can make an obvious difference – isn't quite enough. Our faith in a universal God asks us to have a concern for the whole world. Everything and everyone are local to him. And the local has a cosmic significance, just as the cosmic has local impact. Jesus' teaching in Mark 13, of which we heard the beginning today, started with something local to him and the disciples – the Jerusalem Temple, built with such huge stones that even today archaeologists aren't quite sure how they would have been moved into place. But Jesus, who spent so much time in that Temple in his lifetime, came out of that Temple for the last time before he was to suffer and die, and looked back on it, prophesying that it wouldn't last – as indeed it didn't. It was destroyed forty years later. But the teaching continued in Mark 13 (sometimes called the 'Little Apocalypse') goes on from that local prophecy to speak of cosmic things – moon and sun turned to blood, the stars falling from heaven; distress of peoples and nations, the coming of the Son of Man. The birth pangs of a new age.

The local and the universal are intertwined, and Christ's followers are called on to confront them both.

And then what? Are Christians to confront all the suffering of the world, and then despair?

No. They are to look up, to pray to have hope. Hope doesn't preclude grief for the people who undergo the brunt of suffering; it doesn't undermine sympathy and service; it isn't a matter of 'hoping for the best' in an inactive and complacent way; it isn't triumphalism – 'whatever happens, I'll be all right because I believe the right things'. No, it isn't this at all.

Christian Hope should rather give energy for prayer, because, as our Epistle from Hebrews said, when Jesus died, he broke down the barrier – the curtain – between us and God, so that we can approach with confidence. Before Jesus died, it was believed that only the priests, carrying out the sacrifices in the Temple, could get really close to God to pray: now, through Jesus, each one of us can get close to God to pray. That is why we pray 'through Jesus'. He is our avenue, our pathway, our doorway into the holy of holies.

So, Christian hope can translate itself into prayer, in the face of terrible news. And it can also translate itself into 'looking up' to see the Son of Man coming. And even if it's not given to us to look up, and see him coming on the clouds on the final Day, we can still – as we hope and pray – look up and see the signs of his activity. Within the darkness of history, to see the 'watchfires of the night', as a well-known hymn puts it, and to do our bit to keep them burning. He comes, by his Spirit, in the little and the relatively hidden things. WE should never despair, even

though the news may seem terrible, and so much of what happens beyond our control.

In the end, it's only God who will be shown to have the ultimate control – the God 'whose ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts', and yet of whom we know as much as we need through Jesus. The God who may not actively make the dreadful things we hear on our news happen, but who does allow them to happen in a world that turns away from him, yet who suffers them with us, in his Son, and will bring them, in the end, to a good issue or outcome.

I didn't start this sermon with a text: let me end it with one – taken from our epistle: *'let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.'* (Hebrews 10.23).

In the end, Christian hope is the confidence that what we do for the world, and what we pray, is WORTHWHILE, even though we may not see its immediate results.