

***“GAINING YOUR SOUL”***

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Bloor Street United Church

Remembrance Day Observance

25<sup>th</sup> AFTER PENTECOST – November 14, 2010

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***Reading: Isaiah 65.17-25***

For I am about to create new heavens

and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered

or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice for ever

in what I am creating;

for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,

and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem,

and delight in my people;

no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,

or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it

an infant that lives but a few days,

or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;

for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,

and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

They shall build houses and inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit;

they shall not plant and another eat;

for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,

and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

They shall not labour in vain,

or bear children for calamity;

for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—

and their descendants as well.

Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
says the LORD.

*Luke 21.5-19*

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'  
They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them. 'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

This has been a week of remembering. We have been surrounded by newspaper and television coverage of Remembrance Day itself, with its themes of war: sorrow and courage, heroism and loss. You may have heard our own Bob Farquharson interviewed on CBC about his time as a pilot in Burma. Appropriately, as we commemorate the World Wars of the twentieth century, it was also Holocaust Education week. And because Canada is now involved in a war, with young men and women deployed in Afghanistan at great cost and risk, Remembrance Day has taken on a new aspect. It is no longer only a matter of remembering the past, of trying to imagine what it may have been like for people the age of parents and grandparents, but of recognizing the reality of an ongoing engagement in a dangerous, even calamitous, situation.

It is a truism for us that we must remember, partly in order to honour the best of what was offered by so many – as Bob quoted, ‘for your tomorrow we gave our today’. We have paused this week to mark that. But we also do it in part to be reminded of extraordinary waste and pity of it. The stupidity – that’s Bob’s word again, and this twittering across the globe – war never decides who is right, only who is left. This truth is what we need to be reminded of. Lest we forget, we say. We must remember. And those who cannot remember must be told. We agree with this.

And so it is rather odd and disconcerting to hear the second line of the passage that Chuck read to us. In Isaiah’s description of the astonishing new life for humans, we read that *the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind*. In that wonderful day there will be no weeping, no cries of distress, no babies dying, no exploitive labour or unjust distribution, no hurt or destruction. And no remembering. Where that difficult time had lived in our minds, a blank. Where that pain and anguish had taken up residence in our hearts, nothing.

This goes against the grain for us. Surely we must remember, in order to be whole. And yet, perhaps, as one of our lectionary group participants reflected, if war and suffering really were over, genuinely, permanently finished, there would be no need to remember.

But then, of course, we say, but be serious, when is that day ever going to come?

This was the question that the disciples were asking Jesus that day in Jerusalem, as they wandered through the exquisite temple that Herod had restored, admiring its grandeur and its beauty. This is over, he said. It will be gone. Instead he kept talking about a kingdom with a new basis, a new covenant. He was always talking about the Kingdom. And they said, When? When is that day going to come?

Now at this point we have to pause and look at the structure of the text. The Gospel of Luke was written in the years just after this very temple had been utterly destroyed by the Roman troops in retaliation for the armed insurrection of the Jewish people. The destruction of the Temple came at the end of a long and brutal siege of Jerusalem in which Roman historian Tacitus tells us that 'men and women alike and every age engaged in armed resistance, everyone who could pick up a weapon did, both sexes showed equal determination, preferring death to a life that involved expulsion from their country'. And during this same period, Christians throughout the Roman Empire were experiencing severe harassment and murderous persecution. So in this passage Luke is saying that Jesus foretold this, he saw it coming. We see that Luke uses the story not only to recount something about Jesus' life, but also to offer a word of hope and reassurance to those first century readers who are themselves living in the aftermath of these disasters and in the midst of persecution. The story about Jesus reaches outside itself and addresses the situation of the listeners – it functions as a form of pastoral care really.

Ostensibly, Jesus is saying that the end times are near – it was a commonly held belief at the time, that history was about to end, and many Christians expected the new

heavens and new earth foretold in Isaiah would break in at any moment. Some scholars say that Jesus himself thought that.

Right here though, the message is slightly different – Jesus is warning them, and us, not to be too quick to jump to conclusions. *Beware that you are not led astray*, he says – *for many will come in my name and say 'I am he!' and 'The time is near' – but do not go after them*. These things may happen, he declares, but the end will not follow immediately.

And two thousand years later, we can confirm that it didn't. Not then and not at any other of the times that various clairvoyants and false prophets have predicted over the centuries. Indeed, on many occasions people have looked around them and seen the signs of impending doom. There are lots of stories of heightened expectation – some funny, some tragic. Not just in Christianity either – remember the harmonic convergence? There's another one coming in 2012.

It would be fair to ask if these signs of the imminent end of the world are ever absent from the life of humanity. Wars and rumours of war. Insurrection, earthquake, famine and plagues. It is the human condition to be living with challenge and difficulty, to be almost overwhelmed. Worst of all, there are times when what seemed like valiant and idealistic efforts to improve something derail miserably into yet another round of oppression and cruelty. At the end of colonialism in Africa, the jubilation of independence gives way to corruption, ruinous internecine conflict and failed states. Scientific miracles in agricultural productivity run aground in market distortions. Aung San Suu Kyi is released from house arrest in Burma and then ...well, we don't know. But it probably won't be a straight shoot to the Kingdom. Two steps forward, one backward – or sometimes one forward and two backward. Whether it is on the scale of conflict among nations or within our very private selves, our faith has to respond to a reality which is daunting. Sometimes the good news is simply that you don't have to lie about the bad news.

Jesus counsels a kind of attentive resilience. Do not deny, do not evade, he says. This is the moment you can witness. Focus. Practice being the calm at the centre of the

storm, he says. Don't worry about what to say, I'll be with you and your words will come. In the words of our responsive reading, draw your water from that well of salvation and praise the Lord. Jesus calls his disciples to endurance. He says, remember that you serve that other kingdom, that new heaven and new earth. He says, you gain your soul this way. Not by bold initiatives and revolutionary projects, but by careful remembering, truthful persistence, and the stamina of love.

And so in this spirit let us pray with Robert Louis Stevenson, whose birthday was yesterday

*Give us courage, gaiety and the quiet mind.  
Spare us to our friends, soften to us our enemies.  
Bless us, if it may be, in all our innocent endeavors.  
If it may not, give us the strength to encounter  
that which is to come, that we be brave in peril,  
constant in tribulation, temperate in wrath,  
and in all changes of fortune and down to the gates  
of death, loyal and loving to one another.*

May it be so. Amen.