



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Third Sunday before Advent Year C

Luke 20.27-38

2 Thessalonians 2.1-5, 13-17

Last week our reading dealt with the account of the redemption of Zacchaeus, the crooked chief tax collector. Zacchaeus left us the pattern of repentance. He acknowledged his wrong doing, promised reparation and turned in humility to follow his new Lord, Jesus. We remember that this happened as Jesus was approaching Jericho, only a few miles from Jerusalem. A crowd is following him on his final journey to Jerusalem. A great deal has happened since this, Jesus has made his triumphal entry into the city, now celebrated as Palm Sunday. Even as the cries of Hosanna echo about him we know that the storm clouds are gathering.

<sup>38</sup> 'Blessed is the king

who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven,

and glory in the highest heaven!'

<sup>39</sup> Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' <sup>40</sup>He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.' (Luke 19)

This time it is the Pharisees who are moaning once again. At his entry Jesus foretells the destruction of Jerusalem, then goes to the Temple and throws out the money changers. This cleansing of the Temple is in part really a metaphor for what Jesus' whole life, death and resurrection is doing. With Jesus the old way is superseded by the new. Jesus is the promised Messiah and Temple worship is now irrelevant. Besides which it is corrupt, as his symbolic cleansing shows.

This brave and authoritative behaviour of Jesus is not going to win any friends from the powers that be. He is antagonising them because he is telling the truth. He is teaching the people the truth, here in Jerusalem for the last time. Time is short and Jesus knows exactly what is to happen.

Our gospel account today has moved on, Jesus is teaching in the Temple. It is not always helpful when readings miss bits because sometimes those passages that are missing are vital to the

understanding of the passage we are looking at. Context is often so important. Well that is particularly true here. The end of chapter 19 spells it out,

<sup>47</sup> 'Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; <sup>48</sup> but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.'

The chief priests and scribes begin the attack, demanding by what authority he is teaching. We know very well, he is the Messiah; he is speaking the word of God because he is God. Jesus tells them exactly what will happen by using the parable of the vineyard.

<sup>14</sup> 'But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, "This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours." <sup>15</sup> So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.' (Luke 20)

Jesus' parable is not in any way obscure; the tenants knowing full well whose son he is, still kill him! It is aimed squarely at those who are plotting his death.

<sup>19</sup> 'When the scribes and chief priests realised that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people. <sup>20</sup> So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor.'

Jesus has knowingly walked into the viper's nest. He has to confront evil at every level and he will confront the worst of human evil at Calvary and will vanquish it by love. It is so clear that jealousy, spite and hatred motivate all those who oppose him. Jesus stands for truth, love and justice. He is not afraid to face them and stand up to them by telling the truth. The point is they know what he says is true and when a person in power is challenged that's one thing, but when they are challenged by something they know to be true that is quite another, and it so often leads to the silencing of the one who tells the truth however much it takes. With Jesus that means death. Indeed we know it has meant the same for so many who confront evil throughout the ages and it is as true today as it was then.

The next episode is the trap of 'taxes to Caesar.' This is a blatant attempt to get him arrested by the Roman authorities for treason. Ironically that will happen but Jesus is quite up to dealing with their pathetic traps.

<sup>26</sup> 'And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.'

So now it is the turn of the Sadducees to join the battle. This is where our reading begins,

<sup>27</sup> 'Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him <sup>28</sup> and asked him a question,'

Here we have the key to the whole passage. The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection, we remember the Pharisees did. Think of Martha's reply to Jesus when Lazarus has died,

<sup>23</sup> 'Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." (John 11)

It is to the traditional Jewish belief in the resurrection on the last day that she refers. Jesus will restore Lazarus to life but this is not the traditional resurrection, so then what was the belief of the Jewish people about resurrection? They believed that God would, in his own time, restore all Jews to new life, which meant all who had followed God from Abraham down. God would create a new world which they would inhabit. So then this was an event which had not yet happened but in which they believed and awaited. The dead would come to life in a new way in God's world. This is not so

far from God's recreated order in which we believe. The Sadducees denied the resurrection and this explains their set of ludicrous questions to Jesus. They are trying to belittle belief in a resurrection.

'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.<sup>29</sup> Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless;<sup>30</sup> then the second<sup>31</sup> and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless.<sup>32</sup> Finally the woman also died.<sup>33</sup> In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.'

It is not only to trap Jesus it is to show that the belief in the resurrection is ridiculous. It is vital to note that this key point, namely what happens after death is never so directly tackled by Jesus as it is here.

<sup>34</sup> 'Jesus said to them, 'Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage;<sup>35</sup> but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.<sup>36</sup> Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.'

Jesus makes it clear that this world is not like the next. In the resurrection those who have died will have new life with God. The ways of this earth have passed and the new age of God is completely different, there will for instance, be no marriage. People who have passed through death will be different. He is not saying that everyone will be a disembodied spirit. No, bodies will be changed, as we say, 'to conform to his glorious body.' Indeed there are hints that Jesus was changed at his bodily resurrection. Death has been abolished and the world God creates will be his new world. Jesus makes it quite clear that the Sadducees have it completely wrong. Resurrection is fact,

Then he makes a second point, and it is vitally important,

<sup>37</sup> 'And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.<sup>38</sup> Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.'<sup>39</sup> Then some of the scribes answered, 'Teacher, you have spoken well.'<sup>40</sup> For they no longer dared to ask him another question.' God is not the 'God of the dead but of the living' in that those whom Jesus mentioned are alive with God and awaiting the resurrection. They are with him and at peace in his presence. So Jesus voices our belief that after death we are in God's presence awaiting his new order in which Jesus will return to judge the earth. So we believe in 'The resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.' We will be restored to new life at the bodily resurrection. It is through Jesus that we come to God.

<sup>25</sup> 'Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"<sup>27</sup> She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

It is worth adding that the Sadducees were wealthy and upper class. They were men of power and they wanted to keep it. Jesus is seen as a direct challenge. Yes the net to trap Jesus would be sprung in the garden at his arrest; yes the powers of evil would kill him. But Jesus would rise from the dead, breaking the bonds of death forever and proving that he was not only Messiah but Lord of all, part of the Godhead.

<sup>14</sup> 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.' (John 1)

Our reading from 2 Thessalonians is a difficult one and open to interpretation, all I am seeking to do here is to give my thoughts. Paul gives instructions to the Christians in Thessalonica first,  
<sup>2.1</sup> 'As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, <sup>2</sup> not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.'

I think the first thing to point out is that Paul is addressing the central theme we have just looked at in our gospel reading. Those who believe in Jesus Christ and who conscientiously try to follow his way in their lives will be rewarded when he comes again to rule the earth. But the early church was beset by problems, we have seen it mentioned time and time again. People were teaching false doctrines, seeking to lure people away from the true message of Christ and taught by his servant Paul and those early missionaries. All sorts of false teachings were assailing the true message, even things which, as Paul says here, purport to come from him i.e. false letters! This together with constant persecution is making life difficult for those early Christians. Paul states clearly now that any teaching that says the final day has come is nonsense. So he gives more information,  
<sup>3</sup> 'Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. <sup>4</sup>He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. <sup>5</sup>Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?' All this is difficult to interpret. It is sensible to remember when Paul was writing and that puts his words into some sort of context. Just who might Paul be referring to when he speaks of this lawless one who is declaring himself to be god? Well we know Paul is living under Roman rule. The emperors had declared themselves gods. Emperor worship is now the order of the day throughout the Empire and anyone refusing to acknowledge Caesar as Lord was in danger of death. The emperor at that time was Caligula whose reputation is a stain on history. Apparently he had ordered that a statue of himself was to be erected in the heart of the Temple. Can you imagine the outrage the Jewish people must have felt at this blasphemy and desecration? This was only averted by his murder. It was turbulent times for the Empire too but we know that in AD 66 the Jewish rebellion began only to be ruthlessly crushed in the destruction of Jerusalem and its people and of course the Temple in AD70. There would be no more Temple worship ever. Although Paul never saw this it is hinted at time and time again by Jesus, not least when he enters Jerusalem and weeps for it. All this could have been avoided if only the people had repented and turned to him and adopted his message.

Actually if we stop to think about it, how often throughout history have we seen dictators who put themselves up as gods, surrounding themselves with lies and wreaking havoc among humanity?

As for these people says Paul,

<sup>13</sup> 'But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. <sup>14</sup> For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Christians both then and now must hold fast to the teaching of Jesus and trust in his promises. Firstly Jesus won salvation for us on Calvary. There he took the sins of the world on his shoulders and the renewed relationship with our God of love was won. We will inherit his promises; we will rest with him and will rise with him on the last day. It reminds me of the vestry prayer, 'May the

souls of the departed, rest in peace and rise in glory.' Christian believers must hold fast to the teachings of Christ relayed to them through Paul and those first teachers. They must seek to live according to those teachings and to worship the Triune God with all their being in joy and trust that they will live again with him.

Nothing must get in the way of the truth of his teaching. Awful times will come; monstrous humans will stalk across this world's stage wreaking havoc as they go and causing untold human suffering. But they will never win because evil was destroyed forever by Christ at Calvary. Love always will vanquish hate. We need to remember that 'nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ.' God's justice will prevail and eventually in God's time the final day will come, the day of justice and judgement, the day of his recreated order when death, injustice, cruelty and misery will be no more. The day Jesus spoke of in our gospel passage, the day we look forward to particularly in Advent. I have been rereading a novel by Elizabeth Gouge called, 'The scent of water.' The main character in the story is an agnostic but constantly asks the question. 'What happens when I die?' It is a question we all ask and is dealt with in our gospel passage and in the epistles. Mary comes to faith through the writings of her dead aunt and through her cottage which she inherited from her aunt Mary. The cottage was old and part was the infirmary chapel of the monastery which had been in the village. The novel is a wonderful read and I love the theology within it. It is centred on the love of God and the promises of Christ. What will happen when I die? The answer comes back, we will be with him and rest in his love until he comes again and we rise with him. In the novel, Aunt Mary, who suffers from depression, is finding prayer hard. It is then she meets an old priest who gives her this prayer and I end with it.

*Lord have mercy, thee we adore, into thy hands.*

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