

Sliding doors

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Rev Jean Shannon

You couldn't get two readings with more contrast than these two. One described a garden of happiness growing before your eyes and the other talks about the destruction of the Temple before the Lord will come. What's with this? How did we get from Isaiah's beautiful images to Luke's warning.

It's a long road. Or maybe not. There is such a thin veil between the past and the future – or should I say possible futures. Let us look at the separate readings and then think about the fundamental message.

The Isaiah passage dates back to about 475BC. With much rejoicing, the people left their exile in Babylon to return Jerusalem. But what they found was the ruins of Jerusalem. They had dreamed of this return. Now, having returned, almost 50 years ago¹, the place was still a shambles. The city had no walls. There was rubble everywhere. A temple had been knocked up on the holy site but nothing of the grandeur of Solomon's great edifice. They were disappointed at the progress. Disappointed that somehow God had not restored it overnight. They were depressed about the job ahead of them. The saying Jerusalem wasn't built in a day is no joke.

You can imagine today's refugees drifting back to any of the Ukrainian towns recently liberated. We've seen the destruction on TV. There is rubble where houses, parks and markets had been: Ruins where familiar buildings used to be; Employment, food, water, all utilities - gone. You can imagine the sadness; the will to get on with it...but it takes time. A lot of time. Think of it. It takes 9 months to 2 years to build a single house – how long to build a city?

The promise of a new Jerusalem seemed empty. But Isaiah is not talking about the physical place but rather the interior place – the holy place within us. If we build that – then the city of Jerusalem will follow. Individuals began to understand the new Jerusalem that God had in mind far transcended the markets and traders of before. Jerusalem was being restored – the one in the human heart. One person at a time.

It is hard to comprehend – that we are not called to build what *was* there but rather, something NEW: A reimagining. A new post COVID world.

Slip forward 1000 years or so and the Temple has been restored. It has grown fat and gilded with coins of the realm. The reading earlier in the week was the story of Jesus

¹ That's 2 generations. Their grandchildren were adults.

running amok in the temple; turning out the livestock and overturning the tables. He said that the Temple would be destroyed and rebuilt in 3 days.

It is not surprising in this reading that Jesus responds to the comment on the beauty of the temple with a speech foretelling its destruction. The Temple where he is most unwelcome.

We are prepared for the downfall of an institution blind to its own intended mission. No matter how beautiful it becomes, no matter what kind of architectural glory, it will come to a sad end when it ignores the very One for whom it exists. It will be an empty shell.

Jesus describes a time of testing and chaos; lawlessness and loss; of false leaders and persecution, of wars and insurrections...is this all sounding a little familiar?

When we read God's words from the past in times of struggle and crisis, they become more meaningful and relevant. We see and feel the anxiety of today in ancient texts and it links us in a very real way to the past.

A couple of weeks ago, Geoff read the texts and said, 'Oh my heavens! That describes Trump!' Luke 21:7, the people ask Jesus again when is the good stuff going to happen and he responds, "when you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified..."² Oh my! How can we relate to that!

We are experiencing anxiety, chaos and lawlessness³. There are false leaders rising up and saying, "no, come this way!" and people are processing and reacting to it in different ways. For example:

Has anyone watched (or read) *The Mysterious Benedict Society*⁴ streaming on Disney? It's a children's series. And it goes like this: The world is in a terrible place. The systems don't seem to be working, the trains are unpredictable, hot lines aren't answered, mail is hopeless; the economy is sliding; supply chains are disrupted and general unhappiness is growing. (Sound familiar?)

The grownups keep referring to the general state of chaos as "the emergency". They put it all down to "the emergency" but it seems to be something just ticking along in the background while they just try and get on with their lives.

² "Luke 21:9

³ Universities have seen cheating rise from single digits to up to 30% - so bad, Sydney University is moving back to in-person, monitored sit down, exam halls

⁴ *The Mysterious Benedict Society* – a whole book series written by Trenton Lee Stewart

A bunch of children are called to sit for an exam at a highly rated private school. They go through a series of knowledge tests until all but four are eliminated. It becomes clear they were not selected for their academic ability (although very bright) – they were picked because out of hundreds of children they were especially compassionate; creative and indomitable. They had faith and hope and cared for others. Turns out, they were picked because they are the only ones who can save the world.

The writers of this series have a very clear message – and they are aiming it at children because they are tomorrow.

The only way out of this mess is people of heart. Isaiah 12 is a beautiful promise that can help us get through our present challenge and move us to take action in bearing God's love and care for the world.

Luke's reading was written in an immediate time of testing and strife. Jesus audience were able to find meaning amongst their own predicament. Just as we have today. The listeners at the time were being harassed by both religious and secular authorities. By the time the next generation read this Gospel (or had it read to them) all the predictions had come true. The Temple was destroyed.

We read these stories now in a time of trial and chaos.

It is almost like time is seen through flakes of silica so that each layer is visible through both the future and the past. Knowing what we know, from Isaiah to Luke, these times of toil should not be a time of fear and uncertainty but one of encouragement and hope.

Luke 17:20- says - "Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst."

When Jesus says, not a hair will be harmed, he cannot be talking about the physical body but rather the one Isaiah promises, a new creation – a bigger heart. Christ rising in the actions of others.

These stories predict a time beyond the current mess when God's redemption is drawing near. There will be more – more chaos, more hardship AND there is a time

beyond. As Christ said, He will be among us – “like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other.”⁵ Not like the body that we longed for. Even as we sit in the past which is playing out as our now, the Kingdom is among us.

oOo

⁵ Luke 20:24