

**2 December 2018**

**Jeremiah 33.14-16**

**Luke 21.25-36**

**A Call to Wisdom**

There is an ancient Chinese curse – ‘May you live in interesting times.’

And politically we are certainly living in interesting times at present! Not least when it comes to the Brexit debate.

The political commentators are having a field day! You can sense their excitement ... because no one knows what is going to happen!

We are in un-charted territories – and largely because the Brexit debate cuts across all of the old political dividing lines.

We are certainly living in uncertain times ... and in the midst of uncertainty what is called for is ‘wisdom’.

And I think that the saddest comment to make on what is going on in parliament at present is that there is not a great deal of wisdom about.

There is pragmatism, there is posturing, there is political game-playing ... but I am not at all sure where the voices of wisdom are to be heard.

In times of uncertainty, we desperately need wisdom.

The passage we read from Luke 21 is part of a longer passage in which Jesus is preparing his disciples for what will be an uncertain future. He is preparing his disciples to live in a world that will at times be threatening and unwelcoming, in a world that may at times

look as if it is tearing itself apart, but a world that is moving towards its ultimate fulfilment in the coming of God's kingdom.

He speaks of the ultimate destiny of the world using the familiar image from the Old Testament of the coming of the Son of Man.

But to live in this world, with all of its uncertainty, and yet all of its hope, we are called to live wisely – to keep our heads, to stand our ground, to remain deeply rooted in God.

Wisdom is about having eyes to see what is going on around you.

'Whatever you do,' says Jesus, 'don't miss out on the signs of the kingdom all around you.'

Jesus uses a simple illustration that everyone would have recognised. When the leaves on the fig tree begin to sprout, you know that summer is near.

It's the kind of folk-wisdom that everyone in a farming community would have recognised.

And by using this kind of illustration, I think that Jesus is intentionally wanting to say that the wisdom that he brings and offers is a wisdom that is accessible to the masses – his is a folk-wisdom for life ... the kind of wisdom that he shares and makes known is a deep wisdom for all.

It is not a wisdom of the elite, nor a wisdom of the insider, nor a wisdom of the knowledgeable and intellectual, but a wisdom for all that is open and accessible ....

... and indeed a wisdom that is often better grasped by the child, or the outsider, or the lowly and the voiceless.

The sign of the fig tree, then speaks about the wisdom of keeping our eyes open and seeing what is happening around us, keeping alert for signs of the kingdom ... those shoots of new life that are markers of the presence of the kingdom even in a world that is falling apart.

And what we are looking for are signs of the presence of the Son of Man in our world. Jesus radically reinterprets the phrase, 'Son of Man, for his followers. In this passage he uses it in the familiar way in which it was used in the book of Daniel, speaking of the time when God would bring in his kingdom through the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven.

But Jesus throughout his ministry also uses the phrase 'Son of Man' to speak of his own coming –

- the Son of Man who came to seek and to save the lost
- the Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve

So Jesus' coming among us models for us the signs of the kingdom that we should be looking for and celebrating around us:

- wherever humble love and service are demonstrated
- wherever the outcast are welcomed
- wherever reconciliation is made
- wherever justice is sought
- wherever life is poured out in service of others

The hymn written by Brian Wren, *There's a spirit in the air*, expresses this well

When believers break the bread,  
when a hungry child is fed,  
praise the love that Christ revealed  
living working in our world.

When a stranger's not alone,  
where the homeless find a home,  
praise the love that Christ revealed  
living working in our world.

We need to learn and nurture that wisdom of seeing the signs of the kingdom around us.

But if there is a wisdom of seeing, there is also a wisdom of listening.

Wisdom in the midst of our troubled world is about listening to the words of Jesus.

The one thing that Jesus encourages his followers to hold onto are his words. 'Everything else may pass away, but my words will never pass away.'

And with Jesus it is not just the spoken words that we need to listen to, but the lived 'word as well'. He came as the 'Word made flesh' – so we need to listen to the powerful word of his life spoken through

- his incarnation in humility in Bethlehem
- his welcome of the outsider and the sinner
- his living out of God's forgiveness
- his death in sacrificial, suffering love
- his triumph over death, enabling new buds of life to spring forth in our world

It is somewhat surprising that Jesus should point to 'words' as the solid foundation to hold onto in a fragile world. Words can be so transitory, so fleeting.

After all, in about ten minutes time you will have forgotten most of this sermon. You know it ... and I know it!

And yet the words of Jesus, the Word who is Jesus, offer solid foundations for living in our world with hopefulness.

In the midst of uncertainty, we need wisdom – the wisdom of seeing the signs of the presence of Jesus around us ... and the wisdom of hearing the words of Jesus.

And that wisdom enables us to hold onto hope in our world, even when this world is at its most threatening and uncertain.

One of the great joys of reading novels is to be taken on a journey by an author in an unknown world and an unknown future. When you are gripped by a story you want to find out how it unfolds, how it all unravels ... and what kind of an end the author gives to a story.

I particularly enjoy reading new novels by authors that I know and value. The mark of a good novelist is that you will not know how the story will unfold as you begin reading – even though you may have read a number of books by the same novelist. But whatever uncertainty you may have about the plot and the story you know that the storyline is going to be safe in their hands. And whatever the ending may be, you feel some measure of comfort in the way it will be handled by the author.

And so it is with life lived with God who comes to us in Jesus. God even takes the risk of enabling us to be co-authors with him of the story he is writing in this world. But nonetheless, we can be confident, because of all that we know of this author in the story of Jesus, that the ending is safe in his hands.

We do not know what plot twists there will be in our own lives, for good or for ill, or what plot twists there will be in the life of our world. But what we do know is that the story is safe in the hands of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and at the last, when the Son of Man comes in clouds of glory, we will be able to stand to welcome him, because we will recognise him as the one who came at Bethlehem.