

## In the turmoil, bearing witness

28 November 2021  
High Street Uniting Church Frankston  
David Fotheringham

**Read: Luke 21:25-36**

*Spirit of grace, stir in us your word of truth, that we may recognise your coming and your direction; and grant us grace to follow. Amen.*

The supermarkets and shopping centres take a very different view to the lead-up to Christmas than our Bible-reading lectionary does! In the shopping centres this is the time for tinsel. And you could be forgiven for thinking that we might this season of Advent would begin by preparing the ground for the birth of the baby Jesus, metaphorically painting the nursery and making a nice space. But the reading we have from the gospel today starts very differently.

Instead of starting at the very beginning of the gospel we have a reading from nearer its end, with the adult Jesus reflecting on the world and its future. Just prior to this passage he's talked about the destruction of Jerusalem which then took place in the year 70. Here he brings in a bigger, apocalyptic view, including nothing less than the fear of nations caused by the roaring of the seas, and the worries of our lives which can certainly come to overwhelm us.

In many ways I think that this passage may resonate with many of us more than the tinsel of the shopping centres. In our own lives, few of us have families that don't have complications or messiness, exacerbated by the pandemic in many cases. And on a broader scale, the roaring of the seas is a real concern for low-lying nations in a changing climate. Our reading today names this kind of turmoil, in which we long for God.

This is not new, of course. Jesus' comment, elsewhere, that we will always have the poor with us has a corollary: there will always be the rich and the powerful, which means that there will always be conflict and greed and strife. Among all of Jesus' prophetic words about the world's future he talks about disasters, wars, rumours of wars, people giving misdirections, and conflict. Every age has had its fears, traumas and challenges which need to be addressed, which means that none of these things are direct signs of Jesus' second coming or the ultimate intervention of God.

But in naming that there are scary things in the world, and worries and disasters - this passage brings good news: because the disasters and fears are not and are never the full picture. Because even in the midst of the strife, the Kingdom of God is near. And in the strife we can particularly attune ourselves to notice it. Just as we might look for the leaves

on the fig-tree, look for the signs of the Kingdom of God, because it is eternal and unshakeable and it is seen already now in actions of love, beauty, justice, and grace.

This is true at a personal level. Jesus encourages us not be overwhelmed but to keep on looking for the signs of the Kingdom, which is near. It's an invitation to take the time to notice God's gifts around us, to find gratitude, and to recognise that God's kingdom and love are ultimately richer and deeper than the turmoil that can make us fearful or despair. The Kingdom of God is near, and we bear witness to that, and we contribute to its realisation when we do. We bear witness in our own actions of love, justice, beauty and grace.

**This is a super-important reading for us at this stage in our witness to the life of God's Kingdom through this church.**

Because this is where the new year begins. Advent, the beginning of the church's liturgical year, begins with the acknowledgement of the turmoil, and looks for God's coming – looks for the signs of God's kingdom, and the signs of where God is at work. Advent is all about this.

At this precise moment in the life of our church there is a creative and challenging level of turmoil. We don't have an Office Administrator right now. We have people who have different levels of vulnerability to the COVID virus. We have advertised for a Children and Youth Worker and a Somers Camp Chaplain and had no real applications for either role. We have a Minister of the Word who will be leaving in another six months. We have a community around us which is still finding its feet, post-lockdown, and has people who have taken serious hits. And we have a broader context of a world in which climate change is an existential threat, and COVID hasn't finished with us.

In precisely this turmoil Jesus calls us directly to bear witness to the kingdom which is greater and deeper and stronger than all of this. We are called to notice the signs of the kingdom.

A crisis is an opportunity to bear witness to faith and hope and to what is good, to join God where we see the work of the kingdom calling.

Thanks to phones and zoom, we *are* joined in worship even as we attend to each other's levels of risk. We have a range of ages among us from the earliest years of life through to (in a week's time) 100. We have ministry with children and youth which is happening, and invites support. We are surrounded by people who are reaching out with prayers and love in all sorts of ways, to the community in many forms. We have a world in which to bear witness, in causes both global and local. And we have an opportunity over the next few weeks to notice where God is calling us in this new year just beginning, even if it's different to where we've been before.

Next week there's a survey of the congregations taking place. On the surface it's about shaping up the mission priorities for the sake of a profile for a future Minister of the Word. But I want to invite you to think bigger than that, and definitely not just think about the status quo. Because when Jesus talks about the turmoil he doesn't say "be at peace, for your church office will be open at noon". He directs us to the bigger but more intimate picture: to bear witness to the Kingdom of God. To notice where God is at work for the Kingdom is near. To recognise where God is inviting us to work, too – to bear witness through what we support and how we care.

So between now and next week, when we'll be looking at the survey, I want to ask you, earnestly, to pray and consider well: where do I notice the Kingdom of God in the life of the church around me? Where is God calling for our witness?

Next week, the survey asks you rate again the mission priorities which were identified 6 years ago. Maybe they're not the same, now. In the survey, there is an extra box in which to write what you discern is missing from those mission priorities. I want to urge you to pray hard, over the next week, and not waste that box if you are noticing places that God is calling for our witness to God's kingdom.

Because in the midst of this turmoil is an opportunity for us to be witnesses to the Kingdom of God, where God is calling.

Be alert. Pray. Consider. Contribute to the survey next week. And may God make of us a witness to God's Kingdom through it all.