Luke21:5-9

Pride and prejudice is my favourite book. The first time I read it was in 1964, when I was preparing for an English exam. I had an excellent teacher, Mr Lovett who managed to get thirty boys interested in what appears to be a love story. But it is such a great book, because it not only displays a growing relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy, it reveals not only the pride and prejudice of this fascinating couple, but also that of the society in which they lived.

The gospel reading for this morning from Luke chapter 21 also reveals a society that is noted for its pride and prejudice. The story begins quite abruptly in Luke with describing some people speaking about the temple in Jerusalem. Their conversation was marked by pride. They spoke of the splendor and beauty of the building. They remarked upon the piety of the worshippers and the gifts that they lavished on the still unfinished temple. To give you a quick idea of how impressive this building must have been, it took 83 years to build. Now the residents of Berlin could tell you that their airport may take even longer to build But this project was a massive . It showed detailed and clever planning, for example, 1,000 priest were trained as builders. Was thisbecause they were cheaper than Polish workers? No. This was so that this holy site was not defiled by the men who worked there. The main building was complete with ten years, but the decoration took 73 years. It is not surprising that we find written records such as Josephus Antiquities (15:391-402) saying that” the magnificence of the temple and its contents constantly aroused wonder among spectators and visitors.”

 So why did an apparently well meaning and well founded remark find such a devastating put down from Jesus. The reason was that it revealed the character of a nation. Not for the first time, the temple was seen as the visible sign that God lived in the heart of the capital city of the nation. But Jesus himself was to say that it was a cover for the spiritual barrenness of the people (Mark 11:12-26). So they may have had a fantastic temple, but they were using their religion to stir up hatred against the Roman occupying power. Their religion convinced them that they would triumph in any rebellion. In 66AD they did rebel. The Romans called them zealots. That word is still in our dictionaries 2000 years later for “An extreme partisan, a fanatic” People whose pride and prejudices lead to them to destroy everything and everyone they oppose. But in the end it was they and their temple who were wiped off the map.

Jesus said that many people would regard this as a sign of the end of the world.

Let’s fast forwards through the years. We note that from time to time, people get very anxious about the world in which we live, overwhelmed by various fears and become very concerned about the end of the worked. They are into apocalyptic.

But there is no doubt that there is a great deal of anxiety and deep rooted fear in many parts of the world. It is often combined with deeply rooted opinions and a desire for a strong leader to rescue the people from a hopeless future. It is therefore no surprise that not only did the web site of the Canadian immigration office crash on Wednesday morning, but that many people were visiting web sites connected with the end of the world. It is a great pity they didn’t visit Lectionary .net. That is the website with the Sunday readings of the Episcopal Church. And there they would have had the chance to read the 3 readings we have just heard.

Time does not permit us to do justice to this subject of the end of the world or the last things. It is a big subject . But even if we were to spend a lifetime, trying to interpret the scriptures and try to get a detailed picture of the end, we would not succeed. The reason is quite simple, neither Jesus nor Paul gave us such a detailed picture. It was not their intention to give us a 26 Volume handbook on what to do on such and such a date, starting on the 16th November 2016. That would have done more harm than good. What they have done is to give us some indications of what to do and some dangers to avoid.

Now the first of these,from the teachings of Jesus and Paul sis to say there will be prophets and pundits will say they know exactly when the end is coming and write books detailing all the signs that prove they are right. They might even claim to be the Messiah or some great messenger of God. But these people will give false teaching and cause great problems for believers.

A second characteristic of the end times, will be that God people will face persecution and perplexity. The reason for this persecution will be quite simply that they are Christians. This morning we have brothers from Pakistan worshipping with us. If they were worshipping in Pakistan, there would be a possibility that they might be accused of blasphemy . That is a Muslim member of their community would go to the local police station and say that they had insulted their prophet by word, or maybe by writing something or drawing something. If the man had witnesses and of course he would, the Christian would be facing a possible death sentence. In some parts of Pakistan, there are other dangers, you home being attacked or your church being attacked. We are not talking about vandalism here, we are talking about murder. Since the conversion of Constantine and his accession to power in 303, Christians in Europe have seldom had external enemies. We have not had to live in constant fear of our lives, nor face the perplexities which go with living in a society, which wishes to exterminate your religion.

What do I mean by perplexities?

Let me give you just one example. In 1991, a group of school children and two teachers from one of the leading schools in Moscow came to visit the school where I was working. The Russian government selected very few schools and to honest, it was a gesture to forward Glasnost- the programme of the then Russian President Gorbachev, to bring about better relations with the West. Rather surprisingly the parents of the children were the elite of Moscow and the headmistress was the wife of a general. For some reason, my headmaster released me from my normal work, to be a tour guide. One day I was to go on the bus with the Russians to Salisbury. On the short journey there, I was sitting next to the headmistress, a lively and talkative lady, with excellent English. After the usual chit chat, she told me that she was a Christian. And then told me of the great changes that were happening in the Soviet Union. But she also told me of the times of persecution and in particular of the baptism of her daughter. She wanted her daughter to be baptized, but she could not go into a church in Moscow. The reason was quite simple, many priests were agents of the state security apparatus. If they found out about the baptism, both parents would have lost their jobs and maybe custody of their child. In the days of Stalin , they might have lost their lives or been sent to prison. So this clever woman, took her child to a village a long way outside Moscow, where she was not known and asked the priest to baptize her child. He did so. They got home and her husband asked their daughter, if she had had a good day. Oh, yes, we went for a drive into the woods. Then we went into a building with lots of beautiful painting and met a man with a beard and a black coat and a black hat. “Stop, I think it is time for you to go to bed.” His wife told me. “He guessed what might be said next, so he had to stop my daughter. If he didn’t know, he could not be condemned. Such situations of fear and courage are met by millions of our sisters and brothers , everyday. From North Korea to Eritrea, Khazakhstan to Pakistan and so on and so on. The list is sadly growing every year and the events in the Middle East have led to a disastrous situation throughout the region.

We have no guarantee that it will not one day happen to us. He said that persecution will be one sign of the end. It is not the only sign and I must say most clearly. The end is coming, but no one knows or can know until it occurs. There have already been times when the church has lived in times that appeared to mark the end of the world. There were false prophets and there was persecution and many other signs that the end was coming, but it didn’t. So the first and most important thing to take home with us this morning, is found at the end of our second lesson, “Brothers and sisters “do not be weary in doing what is right” A more literal translation of the original Greek is notto lose heart in doing what is right. Of course when we feel the society around us is falling apart, the temptation is to open the door to fear and then to let it overwhelm us. Or as the Thessalonians did, sit around all day, doing nothing. No, neither hysteria not resignation are the answer. We should follow the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. When he heard that England had declared war on Germany, he was in New York. Despite the advice of his many American friends he decided to leave the safety and freedom of life in America and return home. He knew that there was a very good chance that he would face great difficulties even death. Whatever nationality we have, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses from our home countries, who have not hesitated to continue in their faith no matter what the cost.

It is my solemn duty as a minister of the Anglican church to ask first myself and then you to do the same. But our duty is also a joy, for we have been given the privilege to witness to people in fear, those without hope, those that feel forgotten and say to them. “ I have a saviour, who will stand by you in the darkness of the night, who will comfort your fears and dry your tears and who will turn your fear into hope” And if they ask me, how can this be true? I shall answer, “I know because not just once, but time after time, when the darkness threatened to swallow me alive, his light shone to drive it away, and when I was alone crying , his presence was made known to me by His word and the help of his people and when I was in need, somehow, despite everything he was and is there.

And it was not me that achieved these things, it was always a gift that came from a compassionate God. It is to him that the Glory must be given. And I am sure that you his own people will be faithful and true to him, despite prophets and pundits, and in the face even of persecution and its perplexities, you will not weary in doing what is right.