

## **Knox Uniting Church Cluster**

**Sunday November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2025 (RCL: Pentecost +23, Prop 28 , Ord 33 - Year C)**

**Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Rowville Uniting Church**

**Bible passages: Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 21:5-19**

### ***“When the sun breaks through”***

The weather often makes for a good talking point, doesn't it? And once again, in Melbourne, the weather has been a huge talking point. I mean, what's going on with November in Melbourne? It's meant to be spring, but it feels like winter! For the first half of this month, it has been mostly wet, cold and overcast. Really gloomy, dismal weather. And just occasionally the sun has broken through to remind us that it still exists.

Our two bible readings today remind me of the weather. One reading is gloomy and depressing like constant rain and storms. The other is bright and positive, like sunshine and blue skies. It's quite a contrast.

So, which one do we look at first? Do you want the good news or the bad news? I'm one for hearing the bad news first, to get that out of the way, so that I can finish on a positive note. So let's look first at the gloomy reading, which is the one from Luke 21.

It's hard to find any comfort from Jesus' words in this passage, but let's at least try to understand what's going on. The context of the reading helps. It takes place during that climactic final week of Jesus' life, and this is his final piece of teaching to his disciples (and others gathered around) before his betrayal and events leading to his death. And for his final teaching he chooses to teach – maybe appropriately, about the *future* after he dies, and he paints an awful picture of what life will be like for his followers. It's like he's saying to them, “You might as well know the truth. It's going to be bad. There's no point trying to sugar-coat it”.

Furthermore, it takes place in the temple - that most central and holy place for the Jews. What triggers Jesus' teaching is the way his disciples are admiring and commenting on the beauty of the temple and the stunning decorations (v1). This was Herod the Great's temple, or at least his renovation and expansion of the 'second' temple built after the exile. It was glorious in every respect, with marble, gold and silver everywhere. And it was huge. It is said that the whole complex, including the outer court could hold up to 400,000 people. That's four MCGs of people. Impressive.

But impressive for the wrong reasons. Herod cared more about kudos for himself than worshipping God. It was always about him, and sadly this temple stood as a statement of his power, more so than worship. Having just visited some huge, grand temples in Europe I have to be honest in asking myself, what power, or who's power do they portray?

In response to their admiration of the temple, Jesus shockingly declares that the whole thing will be destroyed! Wow, how devastating for Jews to hear such a pronouncement! That destruction is exactly what happened in AD70 when Jerusalem was ransacked by the Romans, and the temple - such a symbol of power, was completely destroyed by another power. Power verses power. Everything Jesus was against. Thus, he needed to remind them not to rely on temples or any other form of power, because power only causes pain and destruction. Power causes the dark storms that Jesus predicted would come.

By the way, Luke's gospel was most likely written in about 80-90 AD. That means the temple had *already* been destroyed by then, proving Jesus' predictions to be true. Furthermore, Luke's community lived in times of severe persecution of Christians by the Romans, so they probably knew, firsthand something of all the other fearful events Jesus said would take place.

You have probably already noticed that the teaching in this passage (which should really be extended to verse 36), seems to contain some predictions about horrible events in Judea in the first century *and* some predictions about end times and the second coming of Christ. And it's a bit confusing to distinguish the two. Which 'future' is Jesus talking about here?

In terms of biblical text, this passage is often classified as 'apocalyptic literature' as found in other places like Daniel and Revelation. We might assume 'apocalyptic' just refers to 'end times'. It does include end times, but it isn't restricted to that. The word 'apocalypse' is a Greek word which actually simply means 'a revealing' or 'revelation'. So in a biblical sense, apocalyptic writings are simply a revealing by God, through a prophet, or Jesus in this case, of who God is, and how God sees the world. It's a 'God-view' of the whole of human history and the whole human condition.

Going back to the topic of the weather, I love to check the weather app on my phone. The best thing about the weather app is the 'radar' icon which takes me to the active rainfall map, showing all the places where it's raining. The really cool thing in the radar map is the *movement* of clouds. You can see where the rain has been moving over the last two hours, and where the rain is now, and even where the rain is likely to move to in the next two hours! Fantastic! Especially if you are planning to do something outdoors and you don't want to get saturated.

The radar map is a revealing of how things *were* and *are* and *will be*. This is a bit like apocalyptic scriptures. It's not just about predicting the end of all the world. It's the *whole* picture, including the present state of things. And I think that's how we need to hear these words of Jesus.

I'll come back to his words but firstly let's take a look at our other reading from Isaiah 65, which happens to also be a piece of apocalyptic text, but in this case, we have a much brighter forecast of the future!

Again, the context is helpful. This prophetic oracle was most likely written around the time when the Jews were beginning to return from exile, and the temple was being rebuilt. They had been through the horror of the Babylonian invasion and suffered the captivity and oppression for so long. But now God was promising a whole new future of peace, harmony, prosperity and blessing. Just like the sun breaking through the dark clouds!

This passage, like Luke 21 is very contextual for the times and social situation, but it is also apocalyptic in the sense that it can be thought of as describing how God will create a 'new heaven and a new earth' at the end of all things, as it says in verse 17. The same phrase is used in Revelation 21:1 – a vision of a 'new heaven and a new earth'. Like Luke 21 I believe it's okay to interpret it in both the present and future ways.

Now, for me the big question is how to rationalise and reconcile these two vastly differing stories today? How do we put them together, and if we do, what's the result? I think the result is an accurate picture of human life – both the good and the bad, and God's presence and activity in it all!

Perhaps the number one takeaway from these readings is the truth that God is ultimately in control. The whole of history of humankind is a history of salvation, where God has always been, and always will be at work transforming darkness into light. He is always working to bring love, peace and justice into our world. He won't give up until his gracious and compassionate purposes are fulfilled. Evil won't have the last word. Like the light of the sun, God is always shining, even if the light is often hidden behind dark clouds!

And at the centre of this 'salvation history' is the cross of Jesus, the most complete symbol of redemption of a broken world. Although it's a dark image, it is the most powerful image of the sun breaking through the clouds. In another of this week's lectionary readings we have the words from Malachi 4:2, "The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings." In that verse 'sun' is spelt, s-u-n. But it could also be S-o-n. The Son of righteousness will rise. That's the underlying message within Jesus' seemingly gloomy words that day in the temple.

So what does all this mean for us? When I look at both passages I can see two sets of ideas and lessons that are needed in my life. In Isaiah there are joyous themes of new life, hope, and peace and God's ultimate victory over evil. And in Luke I see themes of standing firm, not giving up and staying true, when opposition and persecution comes, in whatever form that's real for me.

The disturbing reality is that the world Jesus predicted for his disciples is awfully similar to the world we live in today. But I believe we are being reminded to simply 'get on with the job' of doing what each of us can do. Our small contributions (as individuals or churches) will always make a difference, because, when combined with others, we become a movement of love, and love can never be defeated. We need to get on with the job of being the hope and light the world needs. As Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3:13 (another of this week's passages), "Never tire of doing what is right". All the while, never ceasing to keep "drawing water from the wells of salvation" to quote yet another passage from this week's readings (Isaiah 12:3)

So, when the dark clouds and rain come, which they soon will, of course, knowing Melbourne's weather, take it as a sign of the reality of the existence of the dark storms of life, but take it also as a reminder that the sun is still shining behind those clouds – even if you can't see it! Then, when the sun pokes through, take that as a sign of God's presence and the power. Feel the warmth of God's love shining on you. Then allow that warmth to radiate out to others. For as we do that, we become part of God's grand plan, being achieved through all of his people.