

Face to face with Jesus: Open-mouthed tourists

Meditation on Luke 21: 5-19

Readings

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Luke 21: 5-19

Sisters and brothers,

this week we are face to face with Jesus again. Face to face with Jesus, who starts to talk about apocalypse... earthquakes, famines, disease, wars, betrayal, persecution, and even murder. And we are face to face with Jesus who also says, "Do not be frightened ... Not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life."

What is Jesus talking about? Death... and life?

Let me take you to where this interaction takes place. Jesus and his companions are in Jerusalem, the city on a hill. They are in or near the temple, the most impressive and beautiful building most of them have ever seen. Its grand structures are covered in silver and gold and precious stones. It was literally the shining centre of Jerusalem and the physical centre of their religion.

These 'open mouthed tourists' are admiring this impressive, shining temple. But Jesus sees beyond the glitter and stonework. He has been observing what is happening *within* the temple. If you look at the Bible verses immediately before today's reading, you would read about Jesus' observations of the temple scribes, who would parade about in their long robes in the marketplace to seek admiration, and they would pray long prayers to look holy, and all the while they were exploiting the weak and helpless. And you'd read about the rich people making a show of putting their contributions into the temple treasury.

What Jesus saw in the temple disgusted him. He was horrified that the temple, which was meant to be a holy place of prayer, had turned into a place of hypocrisy and exploitation. It was the opposite of the vision of Jerusalem that we read in Isaiah 65.

And so, when Jesus' companions started marveling at the temple and how it was adorned "with noble stones and offerings", he could not stay silent. He lets loose. Jesus uncovers what's really going on. And he says that this temple of solid stone is actually just a house of cards. What the temple has come to represent is not the trustworthy, loving, justice-seeking God that Jesus knows.

And what Jesus describes next is an apocalypse.

When we hear the word apocalypse, we tend to think of the end of the world, end times, final judgement, doomsday, a countdown to catastrophe. It sounds really scary. But let's not be overcome by the Hollywood idea of apocalypse. I want to look into the Jesus idea of apocalypse.

'Apocalypse' is a Greek word, which means 'to reveal', 'to unveil'. It's why the final book of the Bible is called Revelation. Apocalypse is about revealing something, looking beyond the veil, drawing open the curtains, lifting the lid, uncovering what is really there, disclosing and exposing the 'unacknowledged' realities of life.

These scary events which Jesus talks about are not necessarily things which we should fear about the future. Many theologians agree that these are 'signs of the age'. As the Message version puts it, "This is routine history and no sign of the end." As many of us are all too aware, earthquakes, famines, disease, wars, betrayal and even murder are unfortunately experiences of life that we cannot easily avoid. Apocalypse is therefore not a threat of trials to come but, as Richard Rohr teaches, apocalypse is a wake-up call and an opportunity for renewal.

Actually, all of us have already lived through apocalypse. The most recent obvious example is Covid-19. When the Corona pandemic was first recognised, it was very scary. We were worried about what would happen if we got infected. Almost every aspect of our day-to-day lives was up-ended. The ability to meet up with friends, to go to school, to have hospital treatment, to leave your apartment, to gather together to worship. All of our assumptions about safety and freedom and the way society works were challenged. The Corona pandemic also exposed the inequalities within our societies: like the fact that those people we rely on the most (the carers, the shop workers, the delivery drivers) are often paid the least. The pandemic lifted the lid on many blindly-accepted practices and forced us to ask hard questions, to make changes and accept new realities. Something about our reality was exposed. Something about our society was unveiled. Something was revealed.

And Jesus' challenge to us is to be patient enough to learn the lessons. Stand firm, he says. Be patient. Wait just long enough, through this uncomfortable and challenging time, to see what God is revealing.

The gospels of Matthew and Mark also record apocalyptic words of Jesus. In Matthew's account, Jesus likens the apocalyptic events to be like the long process of giving birth, saying, "all these are the beginnings of birth pains" (Matt 24:8). It may be painful and scary, but what results is new life. Apocalypse is all about uncovering

the truth, and the truth is that God brings life out of death. God brings hope out of despair. God brings joy out of mourning.

It's a little bit like the 1987 song by R.E.M., *It's the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)*. In fact, during the Covid-19 pandemic, downloads of this song rose by 184% .

We just need to stand firm long enough to let the reality of God's life-giving spirit to really dawn on us. We need to stay awake! In Mark's gospel, Jesus commands his followers to "Be on guard, be alert!" (Mark 13:32–37). We need to stay awake, to really see God's kingdom emerging, to learn from our experiences, to uncover God's truth. And, as Jesus encourages us in verse 13, to bear testimony.

We started this gospel reading face to face with Jesus in Jerusalem, the city on a hill, admiring the temple like open mouthed tourists. The temple, which was literally the shining centre of Jerusalem. The temple, which had sadly lost its heart for God.

Here are some questions for you:

Just as Jesus revealed the true nature of temple worship at the time, what realities might Jesus be revealing in you?

What are you doing to really 'see' reality for what it is? What are you doing to look past the veil? It could be meditation..., it could be spending time with people who see the world differently to you..., it could be simply praying "Come God, open my eyes, let me see your Kingdom here on earth..."

And just what did happen to Jerusalem's shining temple? Around 40 years after Jesus said these words, the temple was destroyed by the Roman army. And another temple, Jesus' body, was also destroyed. Jesus was crucified and buried, but in contrast to the Jerusalem temple, Jesus rose to new life. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus offers *himself* as the way, the truth, and the life.

Sisters and brothers, may *Jesus* shine at the centre of our lives. May the light of Christ *reveal God's kingdom* to us. And so we pray, Come God, open my eyes, let me see your Kingdom here on earth. Amen