

Sunday 27 November 2024 – 26th Sunday after Pentecost – ‘Living Responsibly’ – Janet Morley

‘We want communion, a world renewed, we hope against hope. With the God of history we want to make all things new’. We are beginning to look forward to Advent: Maranatha, come Lord, come. The service began with this expression of yearning from Brazilian young people. That links, however, to the theme of we live out our faith, questioning and searching, and Janet Morley picks up on that, continuing our series on stewardship.

Readings:

Leviticus: 23, 22. Mark: 13, 1-8.

Sermon: ‘Christian Giving’ – Janet Morley

‘And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God.’

One of my favourite recent TV ads is by a bank whose name I can’t remember, and it explains that our attitudes and assumptions about money are formed by the age of seven. It shows a small child talking to a bank employee, and over the course of the conversation she’s transformed into a grown woman, clearly with a more adult understanding of her finances. She does blow that impression slightly as she leaves the bank, as she gleefully jumps into a muddy puddle with both feet.

Like many people who were raised by parents who had endured all the austerity and privations of the Second World War, I had a habit of thrift and frugality drilled into me. Nothing was to be wasted. You had to clear your plate at every meal because food was precious. Budgeting involved creating little cash pots for milk money, dinner money, bus fares, groceries etc, and you didn’t go beyond what was in those pots. Fathers handed over housekeeping money and didn’t spend it on drink. Mothers didn’t indulge in impulse purchases for themselves. If you wanted coffee out you took a thermos. Winter shoes and coats had to be saved for. You didn’t buy books, you visited the library every week.

Now there are many people today who have to watch every penny, who can’t always make ends meet, who can’t afford those little luxuries that are now regarded as part of a normal social life. But there are also many people who do have enough, or more than enough, and I am one of them, and I imagine quite a large proportion of St Marks congregation is too. There will be stages of our life when we feel pretty strapped. But when you have a default attitude about the importance of thrift it’s vital to notice when in fact you are comfortable. This extraordinary verse from Leviticus is addressing you directly. ‘I am the Lord your God’. It is in the nature of God to care about what you do with your surplus. The commandment is this. You are not to hoover up every last opportunity to make and save money – to fill your own barns to bursting. You are to recognise when you have enough. The surplus at the edges is not for you, it is for the poor and the stranger. You give honour to God by paying your taxes cheerfully, by giving to charity and to the church.

It isn’t easy to choose to give away money you could get away with saving for yourself. A friend of mine gave me a beautiful framed piece of calligraphy of this verse from Leviticus, and we’ve got it next to our front door, so that we see it whenever we go out – it’s a great reminder that thriftiness is not actually the same as godliness. Now in this sermon-series about money we’re asked to identify what we value about St Marks and why we support the church financially. Here’s the way I think about it. There are a number of things I value and which I could get cheaper or for free but I choose not to. I read the *Guardian* online, and I could do that

for free, because it's not behind a pay wall. But I subscribe, because I want good journalism to go on existing in a world where truth, fact checking and balanced reporting are choked by tsunamis of lies and conspiracy theories. These days I often buy books, and the cheapest way to do that is online. But largely I use actual bookshops, because I want these places of passion and inspiration to go on existing on our high streets.

And supporting St Mark's is a bit like this. No one is going to demand cash from me upfront, or compare what I give with what anyone else gives. I could get my church fix for free – the opportunity to worship is not behind a pay-wall. But I really value the particular space and community that St Mark's provides. Other preachers have mentioned what is most important for them. I want to focus on the encouragement we get here, to ask questions on our journey of faith and to go on asking them.

I was lucky enough to be raised in a churchy family that nevertheless didn't squash my questions, and that's probably one reason why as an argumentative adolescent I stuck with my Christian faith. And I was helped by a great RE teacher who taught me to study the bible with an enquiring mind. Which meant that when I went to uni and encountered the Christian Union 'God squad', I was a bit wrongfooted. I went along to some cosy little bible study sessions but found that when I raised intriguing difficulties about the verse we were reading, there was a long silence. No. Apparently that was not what bible study meant here. We were only allowed to 'discover' some official reading that somehow smoothed out such issues. I realised that I was being invited into a closed bubble of thought inside which I had to constrain any problematic ideas of my own.

And our gospel passage for today is exactly the kind of text over which me and the God squad would probably have crossed swords. It's a hard text - the opening of the chapter which has been called Mark's 'little apocalypse', starting with what appears to be a prediction from Jesus that the second Temple would be destroyed, so that not one stone would remain on another. And indeed, in AD 70 this came to pass. So I might have asked: Gosh, do you think Jesus really made this prediction, or has Mark, writing later than AD 70, inserted this statement to create an impression of Jesus' divine foreknowledge? Or I might have said: Well, Jesus didn't need to have divine omniscience to foresee that the Romans might well crack down in exactly this way on the rumbling Jewish uprisings against their occupation. What I suspect now is that Jesus did say something to this effect, because the accusation of making this inflammatory prediction was crucial in his trial. In a world where making prophecies about dire events was deemed to be instrumental in bringing them about, he was treading a dangerous path. But for me, I need to wrestle my way to my conclusions, not just be told what to believe.

This prediction about the Temple is just the opener for a whole chapter announcing the approaching (if not quite imminent) eschaton – the end of all things. It seems that this expectation was the lens through which the early Christians understood the hardships they were experiencing. We traditionally work our way through several apocalyptic bible passages in this runup to Advent. Over the millennia, these have proved enormously attractive to a whole range of peoples and cultures who experienced persecution or political danger, and looked for the promise of a decisive end that would deliver them from the turbulence or humiliation of their times. Obviously, as we see, numerous prophesied end times and second comings have so far failed to materialise.

But I can't just write off these passages. I also feel an echo in my heart, I am affected and drawn in to the narrative. Goodness, I *recognise* what Jesus appears to be talking about and I feel the fear. In particular, I sometimes feel the USA organises its election schedule deliberately during the season when skies are darkening and the lectionary is getting very doom-filled. Let's look at the other points made in these first eight verses – the contemporary resonances are strong.

‘Take heed that no-one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.’ I’m sorry, but did Jesus (or Mark) actually foresee Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric? Or the bizarre preaching of the white ultra-nationalist Christian right, who have taught their congregations that he is God’s anointed saviour? Well, of course not, but the techniques and allure of deceptive strong men and their advocates hasn’t changed very much over the millennia. We’re convinced we could never be led astray, because we trust in our own powers of judgement and reason. But in a world where potentially we have more access to immediate facts than any generation in human history, we actually find ourselves quite easily captured by the echo chambers of the internet, where we are repeatedly presented with views we already hold and therefore assume everyone else does too.

Just as an aside, this issue of the dangers of being ‘led astray’ will be interpreted quite differently by different parts of the church. In the biblical tradition, which is full of warnings about liars and false prophets, it’s not just about being bamboozled with misinformation. It’s about being seduced into taking the wrong direction entirely – both spiritual and political. I wouldn’t be surprised if quite a number of our fellow Christians in this diocese would view St Mark’s itself as a place where believers are likely to be led astray. And I don’t think we should be arrogant or dismissive about this. Any of us may deceive ourselves; any of us may be inclined to believe what is most comfortable for us to believe. I just think that the habit of asking questions is a better guard against delusion than is the willing embrace of a system where all questions are apparently settled.

And then we come to the third warning in this gospel passage: ‘wars and rumours of wars’ – something that has never gone out of fashion. As I reflect on my life, apparently lived in peacetime, major conflicts and wars involving the UK were actually a regular backdrop – as Remembrance Day may have reminded us. I was a child during the Cold War, the Suez crisis, the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, the Korean war. Bloody Sunday erupted the year I took Finals. I raised my own children in the time of Greenham Common and the nuclear arms race. We have had the Falklands, the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan. This is not even a complete list. And now again there is open war in Europe and the Middle East, with abundant, heart-wrenching horrors that the powerful of the world seem helpless or unwilling to resolve with justice. Does this mean we are now genuinely entering the end times?

Well, not in the sense that I literally expect the second coming of the Son of Man any time soon. But what I take from the passage is that it is perpetually the case that we follow the faith in a dangerous and turbulent world where anything could happen and where we are not fundamentally safe. This is the condition of being human. We make decisions in the context of well-justified fear – decisions about how to vote, whether and when to speak out or ask unwelcome questions (and on whose behalf), how to spend our money, what to tell our children and grandchildren about the world, what we profess to believe even in hard and confusing times. This is just the deal. It isn’t a reason to shut up and search for the escape hatch. Someone has remarked that ‘dictators feed on fear’; let’s not offer ourselves, our hearts, our minds and our resources to those who treat us as prey.

For this is the world in which God became involved and incarnate. It is the context into which the blessed, vulnerable child was born whom we will celebrate at Christmas. Because even within the announcement of apocalypse there are the stirrings of hope. For ‘this is the beginning of the birth pangs.’ Anyone who has been through birth pangs knows that for sure they will face danger, and for sure there will be pain. But what takes you through is the enormous, wild joy that is involved in the bearing and nurturing of new life and new hope.

Maranatha – come Lord Jesus.

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