



Second Sunday before Advent
Sunday 18 November 2012

Ripping the Cloak, Tearing the Veil

A sermon by the Revd Rosy Fairhurst

Readings: Hebrews 10.1-14, 19-25; Mark 13.1-8

I don't think it's just me who gets a bit nervous of gospel passages which go all apocalyptic on us – that's to say which start to refer to the end of the world. But in a week which has seen the assassination of the leader of Hamas by Israel and the eruption of the epicentre of instability in the Middle East again, but this time in the context of all the additional developments of the Arab spring, we might feel ready to try to get to grips with what it has to say.

What this passage doesn't do is start to crunch the numbers and say when and where the world will end. And Jesus warns about people who try to do that. Instead he tries to get them to focus on apocalyptic as the revelation of truth – and the point about it is that it is *God's truth* which will break in on the world with all its light – and that we don't know the half of what God is up to. Winston Churchill once said, 'When you're going through hell, keep going.' Wise man, keep focused on the fact that hell is not where it ends.

So we have apocalyptic and a passage from Hebrews, with all its arcane linkages to the Jewish sacrificial system. Maybe this makes us more nervous – after all isn't there quite a bit to do with inter-faith relations in the conflicts of the world, especially between Jews and Christians.

Last week during our Patronal Festival – our church birthday party - when we thought about our patron saint Martin, we came back, as we often do, to his defining story when, as a Roman soldier, he cut his cloak in two and gave half of it to a beggar in whom he saw a vision of Christ. Sam re-enacted the ripping apart of the cloth – though without the aid of a sword! Well we have a link today from this action, through the Hebrews reference to the curtain, back to the great ripping apart of the veil of the temple, which kept all the people from the holy of holies. No-one could enter, because of their sin, except that once a year the priest could go in and make the atoning sacrifice, an animal sacrifice, whose sprinkled blood represented the washing clean of the people's sins.

To cut to the chase about what the writer is doing in this passage, he says that Jesus has taken on every role in this ritual and superceded it. He has been both priest and victim. He has been the sprinkled blood. He has even become the curtain, the veil, the cloak if you like, which has been ripped apart to give access to cleansing and forgiveness for everyone, because his flesh, his body, has been ripped apart for us once for all upon the cross.

Let's remember for a moment that detail of the crucifixion, at the moment of the death of Christ – the veil of the temple was torn in two. Jesus has comprehensively dismantled the sacrificial system, showing us, whenever we are tempted to rely on any religious or human system to get the job of forgiveness done, that God's forgiveness is God's work alone. Which is of course what the sacrificial system was meant to be pointing to all along. The Psalms certainly know of a God of forgiveness.

If we cut back to Mark's gospel and the cry to Jesus, 'Look 'Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings' the speaker gets short shrift – 'those buildings, that marble and gold – they're TOAST.' It wasn't the brightest of observations, especially assuming that the man been listening to Jesus' teaching in Jerusalem, the critique of the scribes and Pharisees and the peeling back to the thoughts and intentions of the heart. No-one who listened to Jesus for long could think that he'd be

urging them to put their trust in the religious establishment. Especially not in a time of Roman occupation and oppression of the Jewish faith.

People debate whether Mark's gospel was written before or after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, which is the episode to which Jesus' words point. Either way, it's not something he was gloating about, but events vindicated what he was saying. Yes, the corruption within the Jewish religious system was abolished, but so, with all the gold and marble, was what that building represented of all they held most dear in their relationship with God. The shaking of the foundations in our lives of faith really happens when everything we hold most dear is called into question.

Jesus is reminding his followers that we don't know the half of what God is up to in the world, even in our individual lives, and at times that's terrifying. But even when the turbulence of the world around us is very great, even when we don't know what our next step is going to be (I can relate to that one) we have to hold in mind that we can't see the half of what God is up to. God is working at levels we can't begin to understand. The question is, can we trust that ultimately, what God is up to is good?

Back in the book of Hebrews, the writer is dismantling for his Jewish readers the idea that anything can set itself up and attempt to control us which gets in the way of directly apprehending the full miracle of the love of God. The way they've understood sin has become such a barrier. The famous image of the scapegoat in Holman Hunt's picture speaks to me of what happens when we think that God hangs us out to dry – exposes us to the full shame and awfulness of what we and our sins individually and collectively, would look like if God and God's love wasn't in the picture – so with judgment and not mercy, justice but no love.

And what happens then? It's so impossible to look at what comes up in our lives that we export it, with all the guilt and shame which clings so adhesively to it, onto others. Too hard to deal with. And we bitterly complain about how awful other people have been in a way which washes our hand of our own part in it. For the Jews, the sacrificial system becomes a controlled way of doing that, giving those who run the system huge power. And when we live in a culture which doesn't even have a controlled system for dealing with this guilt and shame it can run amok in different ways. The Hunger Games is one parable for it. The way we keep making scapegoats at all levels is another.

But actually, Jesus has made the sacrifice once for all. So he has sat down – because his work is finished. If we look into his eyes we can see the love of God reaching out to us, completely changing the quality of the light which shines upon our experience. Opening up for us the possibility that God can be at work in our lives now, through the very things which are coming into our awareness. The consciousness of our lack of faith, of our failures to love, of our failures full stop, of the dangerous state of the world we live in, of the fragility and uncertainty of our existence can become an invitation to receive forgiveness and to live our lives differently, discovering what it means to enter into the dimension of the ultimate victory of God over sin, death and all the powers and principalities, though they do their worst.

Instead we can have confidence, not just to enter the sanctuary, but to walk in our turbulent world, knowing, as Rob Bell puts it very well, that LOVE WINS, and that every step brings us a new opportunity to join in with the *how* of how love wins.

We still can't see when or how love will win completely. But that is not our calling. We are called to live *now*, allowing the promises of God about the future to infuse every present moment. Because when we live looking for the activity of God here and now, we begin to see it. We see the

opportunities to connect with someone, to serve, to love, to forgive, to change, to respond and we see the next step on a path which we might well be still in the dark about longer term.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
To reach the end without delay
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
Unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress
That it is made by passing through
Some stages of instability –
And that it may take a very long time. And so I think it is with you.

...
Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be. Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.' Teilhard de Chardin

A word to me as one shortly to be sent into unknowing, and a word to St Martin's as it continues its journey to fulfil its vocation. The Hebrews passage contains the one exhortation to go to church in the New Testament - so don't give up the habit of meeting together, but not because you ought, but to share the strength of God for the journey.