

Morningside            Sermon            10.30am            16/11/25

Signs of the Times

*Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19*

Barely have the Hallowe'en decorations been taken down, and the poppies removed from our lapels for another year than, *vroooooom*, it's Christmas!

Christmas decorations were up at Morningside Station at the beginning of October. The Christmas tree is up, and lit, at Morningside Station, and the centre of Edinburgh and shops up and down Morningside Road already look like Santa's Grotto. Signs of the times.

At least they might provide some distraction from the other signs of the times all around us at the moment. Golden ball rooms in the Whitehouse. Allegations of a toxic Labour Number 10 Downing Street made by people who lived through an equally toxic Conservative 10 Downing Street. Russian drone strikes on Ukraine, and vice versa. Israeli truce-time strikes on Gaza. The Epstein Files. What's in the Budget. What's not in the Budget. The endless parish pump speculation of national and international journalism, unreliable and irresponsible. Maybe the BBC will re-edit it all to help it make sense. Or not.

It is always surprising when this ancient book, the Bible, provides words that speak directly into what we are experiencing today. Whilst there is no great comfort in realising there is nothing new under the sun, nevertheless the words of Jesus, in first century AD Palestine need to be heard. His words are apocalyptic. Apocalyptic means 'revelation'. His words said something to people in His day, and speak to us in our day. He spoke of false prophets and lying political leaders. He spoke of wars and insurrections. He spoke of violence done by one nation to another. He spoke of earthquakes and famines and plagues. He spoke of persecution for those trying to lead faithful lives. First century, twenty-first century.

Times are unbelievably tough. Here is a text that tells it like it is. It is a tale of terror and bad news, full of reasons to make us feel timid or hopeless. Full of examples that all too easily translate into the world we experience now. The gospel writer Luke wrote after 70AD when the Romans had razed the Jerusalem Temple to the ground after yet another Jewish revolt. We translate to our time: the destruction of rain forests and oceans, of global warming melting the ice caps, and of COP 30 in Brazil, with 190 countries represented, but the largest three climate polluters, the United States, China and India not present, and President Trump's speech to the United Nations in September saying that climate change was the, "greatest con job every perpetrated on the world." With the world crumbling around Him, Jesus saw apocalypse, with the judgement of failed persons and institutions, it was soul-wringingly desperate, with no apparent relief to misery. But still the tenacity of faith and hope despite the grimness, maybe because of the grimness, was what He called to be maintained.

Today we cannot ignore Jesus' stern encouragement. We hear His words in our context which is equally dangerous. The ground upon which we live is tottering. Securities of which we though highly are breaking all around us. The political discourse of our world, and in this country, is often bitter and divisive and irresponsible. Broadcast, print and social media speculates and obfuscates its way from one crisis to another, and we are left wondering what is true, or honourable, or safe anymore. The Church in our country, and many countries, struggles to hold its ground as people look for quick fixes and individualised salvation which has little use for long-term commitment, and sacrificial giving, and community engagement. Nearly every news story about the Church of Scotland today is about another building being closed and sold. Of dwindling numbers and insufficient financial resource. And, ironically, of local groups trying to buy those buildings for community use finding that the Church had been bearing the cost of heating and lighting and

insurance and maintenance on behalf of others for centuries, and that local communities who had withdrawn support from the Church are generally equally unlikely to support a community cause. If your interests are short term and individualised, then your horizons are limited by self-interest. If people don't believe in what the Church is trying to do and to be, not only its faith story but its community service practice, then no national campaign, and there have been several, and no amount of good news stories taken to a cynical media, will stem the tide of indifference which has been lapping at our shores for the last 100 years. Is that going to be the fate of our Church, and our neighbours, in Edinburgh, and beyond? It is that serious. Is it the end of time? Is everything forlorn and futile? Is it survival of the fittest, or richest, or strongest? Is it a return to the Dark Ages and the Law of the Jungle? Jesus' hard words are as relevant today as they were in His.<sup>1</sup> And yet... What Jesus was talking about in His day was not a road map to the end of times but a survival guide to living through the days that lie ahead. After His personal darkness and death, light came again. After the scattering of believers, they began to gather again. After the destruction of Temple, and synagogues, and later churches, they began to build again. As it was for them, might it not be so for us? The light will come again. We will be able to gather again. We will be able to build again.

If we hold on, like they did.

Jesus reminds us that the reality in which we live is not permanent. Our perspective is, by virtue of our human nature, a limited one. This too shall pass. The good times will pass. But so also the following bad times; they shall pass too. And something different, maybe even better than we could ever imagine, will come. "Do not be terrified", Jesus says firmly but gently. Endure, and you will win through to life.

Why does it have to be so hard? Not just on global and national levels, not just for the Church across our country; but for ourselves. When times come and a bereavement takes away our breath. When a job we loved suddenly disappears. When a home we cherished gradually decays because we can no longer afford to maintain it. When the bills keep coming in but our income stays the same, or diminishes. When a relationship we thought would last forever withers away.

Why does it have to be so hard?

“Do not be terrified”, says Jesus. Easier said than done! Look at the signs of the times in the world, in the church, maybe even in our own lives. Why this, why now, why me?

And maybe then, looking at the signs of the times, in all their bleak and bitter brutality, open your senses a little bit more, cast your glance to the side of the grim reality, and see something else, or hear something else, or touch something else, or smell something else, or taste something else.

Did you *see* rails and tables of clothing, gifted generously this morning, for the Edinburgh Clothing Store?

Did you *hear* the voice of a primary school aged child read a prayer this morning?

Did you *touch* the hand of someone who welcomed you at the church door this morning, or touch mine as you leave?

Do you *smell* the coffee that a team of volunteers is preparing in the church kitchen right at this very moment, and will you *taste* it in a few minutes time?

Did you see how many millions were raised for Children in Need over the weekend? Were you here last week when people not of our congregation felt it still important to gather on Remembrance Sunday to show respect? Do you know about our caretakers and church officer working hard in the background to insure our Church is clean and safe and welcoming? Do you know of charities like the David Nott Foundation, which we support, providing medical resource

and expertise in areas of catastrophe and conflict around the world? Do you know our young people are already practising for their nativity service, or the organist and choir planning ahead for Lessons and Carols?

Signs of the times go far and beyond disaster, because goodness, and kindness and love are still at work in the world.

And that is God in us and others, not being terrified, but getting on with it.

A man once said: "When I was a boy and would see scary things in the news my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.""<sup>ii</sup>

Signs of the times. Look beyond the lowering clouds, and find the rainbow. Look over the rainbow, and see the sun.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Vol 4, p308

<sup>ii</sup> *Fred Rodgers*