

“Tear open the heavens and come down” - a sermon based on Isaiah 64:1-9 and Matthew 13:24 - 37, preached in Knox Church, Dunedin New Zealand on 30 November 2014 – Advent One and St Andrew’s Day - during which there was “kirkin of the tartan”. The first part of the sermon draws on material from Ched Myers’ book about the Gospel of Mark and the second on material from Jan Richardson.

Strangely at the beginning of a new Christian year, our readings are about the end. It’s as if the planners of the Christian year want us to grasp a vision of the future before we set out on a new year. They want to stretch forward the horizon before we look at what is at hand.

The passage from Mark is called “the little apocalypse”.

I wonder if we can believe more in the apocalyptic today because on the one hand we are not among people predicting the date of the end and because on the other hand we don’t trust Progress as much as we did. The Enlightenment Project is finally being questioned.

Predictors of the end on a specific date are easily dismissed. But what of those who predict constant improvement, unrelenting progress which seems to be the mantra of our age?

We saw it again last week at the communiqué from the G20. Why was the G20 judged successful; because leaders committed to 2% annual growth of their national economies.

Much was good about the G20: the need for growth to be inclusive, for tax systems to be fair, for women’s participation to improve, for poverty to be overcome.

But as many have highlighted, unrestrained growth destroys. Capitalism’s drive for accumulation is killing our planet. The idea we steadily improve with no foreseeable limit is killing us.

One writer puts it like this:

“From this claim flows nearly every belief and value at the core of the modern outlook: the primacy of efficiency and economic growth, the perception of nature as resource, the ethical priority of individual welfare, the definition of the good life in terms of leisure and abundance, and most important, the image of history as continuous moral and material progress. This is the worldview of the Enlightenment, Marx’s no less than Adam Smith’s.”

Finally, that ideology is being challenged.

The ecological crisis is the most obvious challenge. We know the earth cannot sustain an indefinite expansion of production.

The inequality crisis is another challenge. The wealthiest 85 people in our world own more wealth than the bottom 3.5 billion people. Our world cannot sustain such inequality.

And what might be a religious crisis is another challenge. Burgeoning religion, especially Christianity and Islam, are questioning the West’s irreligion. The West is struggling to put religion back in the box of manageable private faith. It’s struggling to respond to disturbing and resilient religious energy.

So belief in Progress is seen as too optimistic.

The apocalyptic vision is different, neither progress nor regress, neither excessive optimism nor depressive pessimism.

There are two Latin words for future – futurum and adventus. Futurum is the future actualising of potential within things. Adventus is the appearance of something new that is not yet within things.

The Christian faith is about Advent.

Advent challenges belief in human progress, that we have within us the ability to selfactualise a fair and just society. After the twentieth century can we believe we are that good or that powerful?

Advent also challenges belief in human regress, that we are only capable of harming each other.

The people of Israel had been promised the good life after years in exile. In 538 BC Cyrus allowed them to return from Babylon and to rebuild the Temple. As a sign of his commitment, he gave them back the vessels for the Temple. The following year a small number returned to Jerusalem and a little later they laid the Temple foundations. They were so full of hope that things would finally work out. Instead, energy sagged and work dribbled out. They thought the rebuilding of the temple would animate action, but it didn't. There was no thoroughgoing change for the better, no fundamental improvement in people's wellbeing.

It's in this context of disappointment that the people cry out:

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence."

More was needed than simply restoring what they had, than rebuilding the temple.

Walter Brueggemann puts it like this of our existing order:

"It is conventional wisdom that we can buy and sell and share and trade within a settled world of care and fear, of profit and loss. It is conventional wisdom that God presides over this sure world to keep it benign and friendly toward us. We are seduced to the notion that we can have the world on our terms if only we work at it in clever ways."

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Can we cry with the people of Isaiah?

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence."

It's in the tearing open that blessing becomes possible. As long as it remains settled and conventional, blessing seems stifled.

Threat and promise, disruption and possibility – not an easy mix, not a safe mix, not a mix we might choose, yet they seem entwined.

We know this in our personal lives, when how we have lived becomes unsettled, when we become unnerved, when our belief no longer works as it once did, when our way of thinking has to be re-examined, when how we live calls for review.

Over recent months friends have faced the challenge of illness, the death of a partner or their own mortality.

In that situation, one of them quoted these words from Jan Richardson:

“Every year, Advent calls us to practice the apocalypse: to look for the presence of Christ who enters into our every loss, who comes to us in the midst of devastation, who gathers us up when our world has shattered, and who offers the healing that is a foretaste of the wholeness he is working to bring about not only at the end of time but also in this time, in this place.

As Advent begins, is there something in your life that is ending? How might you look for the presence of Christ who comes to you in that place?

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun
the knife
the fist.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the slammed door
the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone
the television
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.
It has not come
to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you
will not mend you
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself by
you among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

I have spoken of things public and things personal, and they are related, one affects the other. Personally we know only too well the mix of ending and blessing.

But what of public blessing, of pointing beyond a belief in Progress? How do we receive the blessing of newness in public life?

I wonder if a notice in our bulletin offers a clue. Next Sunday people are gathering to put their head in the sand as a sign of what many of our leaders are doing in not addressing climate change. Perhaps in this ritual we are pointing beyond unrestrained growth, to a different way, but we are not doing it by strident condemnation, rather by ritual, with a degree of humour, with a sense of poetry, by making ourselves look foolish.

I wonder if bringing our plaid for kirkin the tartan also offers a clue. For we remember the time in Scotland when plaid was banned, and people carried hidden pieces of plaid in defiance. What defiance do we carry?

Keep awake, stay alert, to the blessing in the ending of the conventional world, to the coming of the Christ, the new way, the little apocalypse, personally, publicly, in community.