

Message for The First Sunday in Advent

November 28, 2021

Luke 21:25-28

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

This is the beginning of William Butler Yeats' poem "The Second Coming", a poem that many people consider to be one of and perhaps even the greatest poem of the 20th century. One line in particular is very well known and that is, "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold." Things falling apart and the centre not holding certainly describes the state of the world when Yeats wrote this poem one hundred years ago.

Yeats lived in a world of upheaval and turmoil. He was a rather rare person; Irish by birth, he was both a Protestant and an Irish nationalist. At the time when "The Second Coming" was written, Ireland was in a virtual state of anarchy. First there had been the Easter Rebellion in Dublin in 1916 which the British government, while engaged in a life and death struggle with Germany, had put down with brutal force. That led to the formation of the Irish Republican Brotherhood which was the forerunner of the IRA. They waged a war of terror against the British and the British responded by waging their own war of terror. With all of this happening, tensions rose between the Protestants and Catholics and there was the very real prospect of a civil war. As already mentioned, Yeats, being both a Protestant and a nationalist, felt trapped and saw little or no hope for his native land. Then again, he didn't see much hope for the larger world around him either.

The horror of the First World War was over but there was little peace or stability. The German and Austro-Hungarian empires had collapsed in chaos. The Russian Revolution in 1917 had, for a short while, seemed to promise democracy for the Russians but that hope was short-lived. Civil war broke out between the so-called 'white' and 'red' Russians. The Bolsheviks, the forerunner of the Communist Party, gained control and proceeded to destroy all of its perceived enemies. And then, as if all of this was not enough, there was also the first and greatest pandemic of modern times, the Spanish Flu. Still coping with the after-effects of the Great War, most nations and societies were unable to cope with the resulting suffering and loss of life caused by this pandemic. It was especially deadly for pregnant women and that included Yeats' wife. Stricken by the flu and expecting their first child, she hovered between life and death before she finally recovered.

This is the world that inspired Yeats to write his famous poem. Surrounded by instability, war, violence and disease, Yeats was convinced that the end of the world was near. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", he wrote and even though it was written a century ago, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that this poem is now experiencing a rebirth of popularity.

More than one commentator has noted the almost uncanny parallels between the state of the world today and the way it was a hundred years ago. There is for example the threat of war and violence; China is flexing its muscles, threatening and intimidating its neighbours, especially Taiwan. A couple of weeks ago Russia fired a missile into space to destroy a satellite claiming that that was all that they were doing, but many fear that this marks an escalation of the arms race. After winning the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban now faces the prospect of a bitter war with ISIS who, having been driven out of northern Iraq and Syria, now dream of making Afghanistan their ideal state. This of course is the last thing that the world needs.

To add to all of this, we are also dealing with our own pandemic as well which is certainly having a profound impact on the world today. Indeed as I have sometimes said, without being melodramatic or pushing it too far, the impact of Covid-19 is for the present generation what the Great Depression and World War Two were for earlier generations. And of course, unlike those people of a hundred years ago, we also have to deal with the threat of climate change.

During the past summer we witnessed almost unbelievably destructive forest fires and a record heat wave in British Columbia, and during the past two weeks we have seen images of vast areas under water because of the 'atmospheric rivers'. It is hard to draw a direct connection between what has happened in B.C. this year and climate change, but there is little doubt that something is going on; the world is warmer and storms that were once described as happening once in a hundred years are now happening with disturbing regularity. In the past of course we have had heat waves but, generally speaking, they are now hotter and longer than what they used to be. As I have often said, we are getting to the point where having air conditioning in the summer will be as much a necessity as having heating in the winter. And what is happening isn't just having an impact on us human beings either.

Species after species are in danger of disappearing altogether. We can think of that iconic symbol of our Canadian north, the polar bears for example. It is now predicted that with the rising temperatures and melting ice, they will be extinct in the wild in about 75 years time. Truly climate change has so many implications for life on this planet that it is almost mind-boggling, and so perhaps it is no wonder that Yeats' poem is experiencing a revival in popularity today. In so many ways it seems as if things really are falling apart and that some sort of catastrophe is right around the corner. And like Yeats, we might well think that "Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand".

The Second Coming: there is perhaps no more controversial topic for Christians than this. Some interpret today's scripture passage literally while yet others insist that Jesus was using the language of poetry and symbolism. Some people long for the Second Coming to happen sooner rather than later while yet others dread it and even deny that it will ever happen. Indeed to many people, the Second Coming, far from being the good news of the gospel, is the exact opposite since it replaces the catastrophes in the world with an even greater catastrophe, the end of the world. How can the end of the world as we know it possibly be the good news of the gospel? In fact it seems to proclaim the exact opposite of the hope symbolized by this morning's Advent candle. And yet, the promise of the Second Coming is a message of hope.

No matter how we understand or interpret today's scripture passage, the bottom line is still the same; that God is in charge and that in the end, unintended, God is going to get what God wants. I like the way one writer put it:

“As it is sometimes said, we Christians don’t know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future”.

Whether it be in the wider world around us or in our own personal world, we do know who holds the future. God does, and God doesn’t just hold the future, he is also present and active here and now as well. This is one of the great promises of Christmas. Emmanuel; God is with us. The poet W. B. Yeats may have well described both his world and our present world in his poem, “The Second Coming”, but he didn’t quite get it right in his famous line, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”. Yes, things may fall apart but the centre will always hold. It will because the centre belongs to God.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this first Sunday in Advent, this day whose theme is that of hope.

As you well know, life can be very difficult at times and sometimes it almost seems to be overwhelming. Nevertheless, we are the people of hope because we know that the great promise of Christmas is true; Emmanuel, God is with us. No matter where we go or whatever happens, you are with us and this gives us both strength for the present and hope for the future.

We thank you for our hopes for the coming weeks as we celebrate the birth of your Son, especially after the let-down that was Christmas for so many people last year with the restrictions in place.

We pray this day for all who stand in need of hope. We pray for all who hope for healing, whether it be for themselves or someone else.

We pray for all who grieve for the loss of a loved one, and we especially pray for those facing their first Christmas without a loved one.

We pray for all, both near and far, who hope for a better future for both themselves and their loved ones.

We pray for the people of British Columbia devastated by the storms and flooding, losing so much and hoping for relief as they look to rebuild their shattered lives, homes, and businesses.

We pray for all of us who hope that this pandemic with all of its impacts, great and small, will soon be over. We hope and pray that the latest variant is not as threatening as some people fear it may be.

We pray this day for all those who have lost hope for themselves, their loved ones, and the future. Comfort, strengthen, guide, and reassure all who feel trapped or overwhelmed by life, its heartaches, and struggles. Grant that the hope symbolized by this morning's candle may truly be a reality in the lives of all your children.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen