

2023-07-02 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands

1 Sam 28: 3-19; Luke 17: 20-end

You do someone a favour and do a swap on the rota and your reward is to tackle two readings like this evening's!

I'm going to leave the first lesson to stand alone as part of the story of Samuel, Saul and David and concentrate on the passage from Luke.

As one commentator I came across said, when you hear of a Pharisee in Luke, you know it means trouble! And this passage comes in a couple of chapters which seem to be Luke showing Jesus trying to shake up the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were ardent followers of the religious laws but that seems to have made them blinkered. This is a warning to us. I'm not sure that you can ever say that the Bible categorically says anything, it just isn't that simple. And how could it be, it's a collection of writings, yes inspired by God, but written over hundreds of years by all sorts of different people trying to address different situations. On top of that, although human nature has probably not changed and I'm sure we can say that God's nature hasn't changed at all, we are of course almost two thousand years on from the latest writing and cultures have changed.

Be mindful to question what you think you know, keep open the dialogue with God at all times, remember to listen with a humble ear to the Holy Spirit, be wary of any human statement which tries to limit the experience of God.

We know from our understanding of the Palm Sunday story that there is an expectation of the Messiah coming at the time this story takes place. Jesus seems to be pointing out that no-one will be able to plot a path to this time. It's unclear however, what exactly the ground is that he gives.

In verse 21 he says to the Pharisees in this translation, **'For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you'**. This could more literally be translated as 'God is in you', a meaning we might accept from our knowledge of other sayings in the New Testament that we have heard. But I have read that this is categorically not something Jesus would have said to the hostile Pharisees. Perhaps it is meant in a more generic way, including all and not just the Pharisees, perhaps he is referring to himself as being there now with them.

I feel that in either case, the present tense sings loud and clear. As we go on to hear, an impressive second coming is anticipated, BUT ALSO, the kingdom is here now, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, in us, with a responsibility on us to be that kingdom to those around us and to draw others into it.

If you were a film-maker you could certainly make something of a horror story of the description we heard of what it will be like when it is the 'Son of Man's Day'. But I was struck by the line, **'anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away'**.

It took me straight back to the rules surrounding fire alarms. A few months back when I was invigilating at, fortunately, a mock exam the fire bell went off. It took me a few seconds to realise that it was the fire bell – I hadn't heard it before. As a room we nodded at each other that yes, indeed, there were some rules to follow and we knew what they were, we got up – picked up a coat if it was absolutely to hand because this was when it was cold – and filed out to the designated place.

My constant in interpreting what I'm reading in the scriptures is that God is good. If God is good, it follows that the promise we prize of a life beyond that which we know in the present, whatever it might look like, will be something good.

And God's patient mercy is a characteristic I cling to. Anything less would have had me fallen by the wayside many moons ago.

When that fire bell went off, we had a moment to understand, enough time to make a choice to obey the rules and save ourselves or to call the system's bluff and stay in the warm thinking it was probably a false alarm.

That we have a choice in life whether or not to believe in God seems self-evident. I hope that there will be a moment to make that choice even just before death. And I put forward to you the possibility that earthly death is not the last moment to be able to make that choice.

But I want to take you back to this morning's lesson – the giving and receiving of God is the best that life can offer. If we can do that then we will be glad to see 'the Son of Man in his day.'