

Sunday 16 November – 2nd Sunday before Advent

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

The Church year, as I'm sure many of you know, begins not in January, or even with the financial year in April, but actually at the start of December (or in some years, like this, at the end of November). Advent Sunday is the start of the Church's year. Today, then, is the second Sunday before Advent, after this just one more Sunday - "Christ the King" next week. In our Sunday services, during the Church year, we follow a set of prescribed readings. In this church we use the "Revised Common Lectionary", a three year cycle of readings that works through each of the three so-called "synoptic" Gospels, that is the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, of the life of Jesus. We are coming to the end of the third year, "Year C", in which we have worked our way through Luke's Gospel. Appropriately this Sunday, the penultimate one in the cycle, our reading is taken from the final passage of teaching Jesus gave to His disciples. After these events we move straight into Jesus' last supper with His followers and the inevitable conclusion of His life - which comes in next week's lectionary reading.

Today's passage, and Jesus' final public teachings, takes place as we heard in the reading in the temple in Jerusalem. It is not, of course, Jesus' first visit to the temple. If we cast our minds back to the beginning of Luke's Gospel we may remember that Jesus was brought, by His parents Mary and Joseph, to the temple as a tiny baby. It's the story that was read back in January at our Candlemas service. On that occasion you may remember Jesus is greeted by two elderly worshippers, Simeon and Anna, the latter of whom is described by Luke as a widow of eighty-four who spent her every day in the temple. It is therefore a shame that the account of this final visit from Luke chapter 21 omits the first four verses of the chapter, which would take us right back to that first visit. Because it's just a few verses, I'm going to read them now because they provide an important context of what is to follow (the passage we just heard) and are part of a wider theme about Jesus that runs throughout Luke's Gospel.

"He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell

you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'" Luke 21:1-4

This poor widow is then contrasted with the magnificence of the temple and how it was "adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God" but, as Jesus immediately says: "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down". Jesus' message in Luke's Gospel, from the very moment of His conception, as declared by His mother Mary, is one of revolution:

"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;" Luke 1:32

It's there also in the encounter with Simeon and Anna when Simeon says:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel" Luke 2:34

Then, in this final visit to the temple, in Jesus' final public teaching, we have the contrast between the widow's mite and the beautiful building and richly adorned stones and gifts, all to be thrown down, whereas the humble two copper coins are, Jesus tells us, of much greater value to God. It seems to me that Jesus' listeners do much the same as the lectionary compilers when they seem to pay no attention to the widow and concentrate on the glories of the temple. Even when told that it will soon all be destroyed, all the disciples want to know is when this will happen and what will be the signs to look out for of its impending doom. Although Jesus tells them of things that are to come: wars, natural disasters, persecutions, He warns them not to pay too much attention to these... and especially not to anyone claiming about such things that: "The time is near!". If we take just the extracted passage for this morning things might sound rather daunting, even the conclusion "By your endurance you will gain your souls" doesn't really seem to offer much comfort - do I have that endurance, what if I haven't? Again, as with the way the lectionary did not include the account of the widow's offering, the way it ends is not entirely helpful. As Jesus continues we get the real answer, for although we may fail, although we may not have that endurance that overcomes, He does. The chapter concludes with the promise of Jesus' return, how:

"People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. " Luke 21:26-7

Although, as I've said, this lectionary year has mostly been taken from Luke's Gospel, as in each year there are also passages taken from John's Gospel at different points throughout the year. In September we had the well-known story, from John chapter 3, of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night - although a powerful member of the Jewish council, he was afraid. Amongst other things, Jesus gave him this reassurance:

"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him." John 3:17

That was part of the Gospel for what the Church calls "Holy Cross Day", which is a reminder that it is through the Cross of Jesus, and only through the Cross of Jesus that the world is redeemed. As I've said, our readings from the Gospel of Luke conclude next week, the final Sunday in this Church year with a passage from Luke 23, the account of Jesus' crucifixion. The theme that has run throughout this Gospel reaches its conclusion as Jesus, suffering and dying in the worst imaginable way, with two thieves, the lowest of the low in that society, ultimately turns the world upside down. For in that final great act, He is established as "the King of the Jews", but more than that, He is the King of all creation, and so our name for next Sunday, the conclusion of the Church year is "Christ the King!".

Amen