

Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018

Daniel 12.1-3

Hebrews 10.11-14

Mark 13.24-32

It is incredibly difficult to predict an earthquake: much harder than it is to predict the results of a referendum or presidential election, for example. We know a lot about *where* earthquakes are likely to happen—along the edges of continental plates and fault lines—but this is not very useful without also knowing the *when* and the *how big*. Millions of earthquakes occur every year, and most of them are too minor to matter.

For all the limitations of political polling, polls provide more and better information than the sorts of things that seismologists measure: foreshocks, electromagnetic activity, and the concentration of radon in the groundwater. These are all precursors of devastating earthquakes, but they are also precursors

of insignificant earthquakes and no earthquake at all. And then, there is the popular idea that animals know when earthquakes are about to happen, and that we should therefore pay attention to our pets behaving weirdly. The problem is that pets behave weirdly all the time: our tendency to notice their behaviour during an earthquake is likely a case of confirmation bias. And even if animals can sense things well before our early warning systems kick in, we have not found a reliable and useful way to work this out from their behaviour.

For the most part, national geological surveys are not in the prediction business anymore: instead, the focus has shifted to improving the communication systems that alert people as early as possible in an earthquake's life, and designing and reinforcing buildings to withstand seismic events.

+++

When confronted with gospel texts like the one we have just heard, preachers are wont to point out that there is a world of difference between prophecy in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible and the prognostication associated with the likes of Nostradamus and Millerism. Hebrew prophecy—as exemplified by Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah—is about speaking truth to power, we are told, not about predicting the end of the world. This temptation to distance ourselves from end-times prophecy is not only driven by concerns about intellectual respectability: in the 20th century *doomsday cults* have also become the targets of our moral opprobrium in light of tragic and violent events like those surrounding David Koresh’s Branch Davidians and the earlier Jonestown massacre that gave life to that most American phrase “drinking the Kool-Aid”.

But this insistence that prophecy is not sooth-saying is surely a case of protesting too much, given the unsettling fact that the Jesus of the Gospels looks very

much like a doomsday prophet in the straightforward sense of someone who believes that they are at the brink of the end of history, of the end of the world as it has ever been known. And, as our reading from Daniel this morning suggests there is precedence for this kind of thing in the Hebrew biblical prophetic tradition too. It is no coincidence that these two texts are placed together.

Jewish and Christian *apocalyptic* literature—for example in the prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel and most famously in the Revelation to St John—have fascinated hearers and readers and scholars for centuries, and no wonder: they are vivid and puzzling in equal and superlative measure. These are hard texts to understand, employing both symbolic and realistic language, referring to both historical and cosmic events: not only are allegorical and literal readings possible, but both are necessary. It is not at all clear what they mean: neither what they meant at the time nor what they should mean to us now.

I don't know, for example, whether the prophet Daniel was waxing allegorical about Israel's political future relative to that of her Seleucid persecutors, or whether he really thought that dead bodies would soon start popping out of the ground, some raised to contempt and others to shine like stars. Nor do I know, whether Jesus believed that he would return soon—within a generation, he says here as well as in Matthew's and Luke's gospels—atop a cloud, even as the Sun fizzles out amidst meteor showers and supernovae. If he did, he would have been wrong. The caveat at the end that no one but God the Father alone knows exactly when these things will come to pass does not really make him any less wrong, a hundred generations later, the rising and falling of a dozen imperial powers later, the Sun and Moon still stubbornly shining.

This is, admittedly, a matter of some embarrassment to Christians, and it feels impious to bring it up in this pulpit. There have, as you might expect, always been

clever solutions by which we have attempted to save Jesus from the charge of ignorance or error. These almost always have an air of desperation to them, and seem to me to be confused about who it is that needs saving. With all due respect to the fathers of the Church and the countless biblical scholars who have since seen fit to wring hands and spill ink over this issue, it could not matter less, I think, whether Jesus knew all the relevant facts or whether he ever got them wrong. The credibility of Jesus—the reason for our trust in him—is not that he sees the future clearly, but that he helps us see the *present* clearly: and the miracle of it is that this is as true now—a hundred generations and a dozen empires later—as it was then, in that time between Jewish revolts and just before Rome smashed Jerusalem into smithereens in the twilight years of the apostolic age.

Maybe this is an experience peculiar to adult converts, but I hope to God that you have had the experience of encountering Jesus—through the parables he tells or

details of his life as they have been told to us—and felt that jolt of recognition, of epiphany, of revelation, of scales falling from your eyes because there is something about the world, about human beings, about yourself that you now know and cannot unknow.

Maybe, from the parable of the workers in Matthew's gospel, it is the knowledge that we are worth more than our labour and production, and therefore that others are too.

Maybe, from the story of the woman taken in adultery in John's gospel, it is the realisation that we are not to be equated with our most shameful acts, but are loved, which enables us to live better.

Maybe, from the sermon on the plain in Luke's gospel, it is that violence only begets violence, and that there is unspeakable strength in vulnerability.

Maybe it is the circumstances of his trial and death: in which we can see, as clear as anything, that he means everything he says, every remarkable utterance, words of everlasting life.

I don't know what it is for you, but I am pretty sure that the thing about Jesus that grabs you—that grabs and shakes anybody—has nothing to do with his ability or otherwise to forecast eclipses and earthquakes.

+++

I am aware that I have changed the topic, and have refused to give the cynics and skeptics—the cynic and skeptic in myself—a satisfactory answer to questions about what Jesus knows and how he knows it, whether he could be wrong about the future, which raises questions about whether he could be wrong about all of it.

But I stand by the evasion, because I suspect that our well-honed critical faculties are themselves evasive strategies for avoiding an even more difficult set of questions. The claims that Jesus makes—about himself, about God, about the world, about us—make claims on us that at least I have found compelling and convicting, and I suspect, you too. If we trust him, our lives have to change: that much is clear. We have to die with him and be raised with him, which is say that we have to live like him, not least because it is his spirit that enlivens us.

And so it is easier, more convenient *not* to trust him; to turn our attentions away from the moral demands he places on us—the demand to live as if the world will end tomorrow, which is to say to live honestly and truly, in ways that reveal who we are and what we care about and where our allegiances ultimately lie. It is easier, more convenient to try to unknow all the things that Jesus has made known to us, by distracting ourselves with other questions than the

one about how it is that we are to live, on this side of glory, this side his first advent as well as his second.

It nearly works, our attempt to forget. It looks like it works all too well: God knows we don't live as if the world will end tomorrow. Except that we have never successfully forgotten the gospel: a hundred generations later, a dozen empires later, it turns out that Jesus was right at least about his words not passing away. They are with us still, if we want to hear them.