

St Chad's Church, Sunderland

Pontus Bramberg

2nd Sunday before Advent (Remembrance Sunday), AD 2022

May I speak in the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Temple was the undisputed centre of religious practice for the Jewish people in the first century. While there were synagogues, or houses of prayer, wherever there were Jews, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was the only place of sacrifice and the very specific house in which God dwelt. The Temple very literally was the house of God and its destruction would be a distressing thought for most Jews in the time of Our Lord. The Lord however does foretell the destruction of the Temple, which would be realised only a few decades later, with the Roman siege of Jerusalem in AD 70. Why is this significant for Christians? After all, the Church is the new Temple, built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone [Ephesians 2:20-22], the abundance and fullness of God's grace no longer confined to a single building. Christ tells His followers that the things that they see will all be thrown down; the external beauty of the Temple, supposed to be the House of God, conceals a spiritual bankruptcy, hypocrisy, rejection of Our Lord and His Gospel, and ultimately His death at the hands of the religious authorities. Even the greatest earthly beauty is temporary and completely worthless if people are not faithful to God's holy word and steadfast in doing His will. We might think of all the beautiful church buildings across this country standing empty with no congregations, what use are all these buildings if the work of the Lord is not being done? None whatsoever. This is not to say that beauty should not be appreciated and created but that it must be in service to the church's essential task given by Our Lord Himself: to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that He has commanded us [Matthew 28:19-20]. Beauty, especially when deeply symbolic, can certainly be profoundly helpful in this mission but fundamentally all earthly beauty is passing and of no worth compared to the eternal beauty of the presence of God.

The Lord continues by warning the disciples and giving them signs for which to look, further warning them of that which is to come: the fall of Jerusalem itself or, alternatively, the end times. One of the signs is false prophets, claiming to speak in the name of Christ but preaching a message contrary to the Gospel. We can certainly see this in our own time with various false teachings presented as Christianity or warping the Gospel to fall in line with the whims of the modern world. I could go on about various heresies and errors but an even more prevalent issue in our day is a lukewarm attitude to the faith: essentially a failure to recognise that our faith is true and that it is the only sure way to salvation, which is obtained by grace through faith. Our Lord proceeds to tell the disciples of the persecution they will suffer; this is, again, not limited to the apostolic age

but relevant even in our day: every day Christians around the world are killed for their faith and even in our communities there is increasing hostility toward Christians and Christianity. This is not the time to despair or to give up our faith! On the contrary, we must remain ever more committed to and vigilant in our faith, more zealous in mission through word and deed, and, above all, more faithful to the Gospel with greater love for God and our neighbour. We must not curse those who persecute or mock us but, as faithful believers in Christ and the forgiveness of sins, must pray for their conversion and repentance so that they might come to faith and to salvation. Victory over death and evil has already been won through the death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ and at His second coming He will judge the earth; as the prophet Malachi foretells at the very end of the Old Testament (for now disregarding the Apocrypha), the day when the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble and the sun of righteousness, that is to say the Lord, will rise for those who are faithful believers in God.

We cannot know when the end times are coming but one thing we do know is that the Church of God will remain. Our Lord himself promised to St Peter that the gates of Hell shall not prevail upon the Church. The world may change, kingdoms rise and fall, but the Church and the kingdom of God are eternal and can never be subdued by the forces of evil. This we know for sure: God will judge the world and we all deserve eternal punishment for our sins and can only be saved by the grace of God given through faith. There is however one thing greater than faith: love; love for God fuels our faith and even faith strong enough to remove mountains is nothing without love [1 Corinthians 13:2] as Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians. Love is God's very being and the whole Law is summed up by Our Lord in the two commandments 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' and 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. We are called to love everyone, regardless of faith or lifestyle, but this does not mean that we have to approve of everything someone does; in fact, we are bound to call out behaviour contrary to the Gospel and to hate sin (while always remembering our own sinfulness and showing mercy and love to sinners).

It is clear that the punishment for sin is death and that each and everyone of us is worthy of eternal death on account of our sinfulness but God, in His infinitely abundant love, allowed the only sinless victim, Our Lord Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son, to be killed and thereby take upon Himself the punishment due to each and everyone of us. When we sin, which our fallen nature compels us to do, we are spitting in the face of the perfectly innocent Christ who loved us even to the point of dying for us. God utterly hates sin but out of His infinite love for mankind He forgives all who believe in Him and truly repent. The debt of all sin, past, present, and future, was paid by the death of Christ. Our sinfulness is greater than we know but God's love is even greater, readily forgiving the repentant over and over again despite the insult to Him which is sin. Through our baptism we are washed clean and regenerated in righteousness through the Blood of Christ, the Lamb of God. The acceptance of His sacrifice and His teaching will lead the faithful to eternal life, despite us deserving eternal damnation. We wear white as a symbol of purity through being washed in the Blood of Christ. At every Mass Christ's sacrifice is made present to us through the free giving of His Body and the abundant outpouring of His Blood, whose one giving and outpouring is more than sufficient for all the faithful. It is true that we should be careful not to present ourselves for Communion if there are sins on our heart of which we have not repented or if we are not at peace with the congregation but this abundant offering is for all the faithful. The

bread is given for the faithful and the Blood is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. In a few moments the Eucharist will be consecrated on the altar, the bread and wine truly and bodily becoming the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Book of Common Prayer the administration of the sacrament to the faithful is accompanied by the words 'The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life: Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving' for the bread, and 'The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life: Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee, and be thankful' for the cup. While these words are seldom used in our churches today they remain just as true today as they were when the Book of Common Prayer was written in 1662. Our Lord's one sacrifice of Himself, which will soon be made present for us in the Holy Eucharist, is abundantly sufficient to pay for all our sins but before sharing in that abundance we must be baptised, believe the Gospel, and repent of our sins.

Amen.