

Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity

thou knewest not the time of thy visitation

The Gospels all have the Lord prophesying in some form the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The lazy mind says this is obviously written after the event, but that is simply false. If it were, we would expect to find some of the specific details of that destruction which the Jewish writer Josephus (who claims to have seen it) gives. We do not find them in the Gospels. Instead, we find reminiscences of the first destruction as recorded in the Old Testament. So I think it much less foolish to say that the Gospels record (allowing for detailed variants) what the Lord said.

That does not of itself prove the Lord a prophet. Any astute commentator might have guessed that the clash with Rome would come to a head in open rebellion. Then one of two things would happen. In one of the “Dead Sea Scrolls”, for instance, we find preparation (partly spiritual, partly material) for a successful revolt, which is the first possible outcome. This might be (but actually is not usually) the hoped for precursor of a new worldly Kingdom under a new Anointed One – the Maccabean revolt again, but without its degeneration into the Herods. So “rebel, because God is on your side”. The other outcome would of course be defeat and destruction, a worse condition than the present Roman rule. Worldly wisdom, then, might say “don't try it, because you will fail badly”.

Now the Lord did not lack worldly wisdom, and one might argue that this spills over into prophecy, which is (incidentally) more about meanings than predictions. And prophecy had for some time taken the form not of new impulses direct from God, but of a way of understanding the near future on the basis of the past. So Daniel re-understands Jeremiah. The process seems to involve detailed study of texts and meditation on them, not without prayer and fasting. A believer in the God who reveals himself will accept that he might indeed bless these human efforts and make them fruitful. The learned call this “apocalyptic”, but since the vulgar assume that term means lurid descriptions of the End Time (probably the product of fevered imaginations) the term is better avoided.

The Lord is of course much more than a prophet, but that does not mean that he is not a prophet. So what the Lord does say as a prophet to his people is that the destruction will come “because thou knewest not the time of your visitation” - you would not realise how God was trying to rescue you. What is this visitation? Surely the point (as we can with hindsight see it) is that God has “visited and redeemed his people” (in the words of the Benedictus) through John Baptist and still more in his Son. But mostly with no good effect. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” For visitation cannot leave the situation unchanged. It will change – for better or for worse.

We believe that God's Old Covenant with the Jews led to Jesus, and that the continuation of Judaism after Jesus is therefore strange. As an obvious matter of fact, orthodox Judaism as it now is (I have nothing to say about various liberal or secular movements) is not the Judaism of our Lord's time. Only in a limited sense is it the continuation of the Old Covenant. There is no temple, there are no sacrifices. It is a product partly of the Judaism already perforce practised outside the Holy Land in Jesus' time, partly of some patterns of study of Torah in Babylon (and also in Judea). Both of these activities survived the destruction of temple and city. This is not to condemn orthodox Jews now. They remain faithful to such part of the Old Covenant as is available to them. God will make of them what he will. But in and immediately after the Lord's time, the Jews of that time were presented with the offer of the New Covenant, and most of them did not accept it.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem. For he was a prophet, and saw what was coming. And he was completely human (as well as completely God) and so had all human sympathies for his people. The Temple mattered to him (this as not axiomatic; some Jews thought that as a product of Herod it was invalid) enough to cleanse it (and even, in Mark) to issue a legal ruling to his followers against carrying stuff through it. This is so uncommon in Jesus that it must be genuine.

Our duty as Christians is to respond to the blessings God has given us in the New Covenant. These are the terms on which God deals with us. In doing so, we notice how the Lord cared for the tangible features of the Old Covenant, so we accept that Christianity (the New Covenant) is not so “spiritual” as to lack tangible expression. We value what we have lost; we preserve what we can. We, like the Jews of Jesus' time, are oppressed by a godless system. We will remain faithful to God.