

Trouble ahead

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 17th November 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: **Luke 21:5-19**

(Year C 2nd Sunday before Advent)

Introduction:

There may be trouble ahead,
But while there's moonlight and music and love and romance,
Let's face the music and dance.¹

In listening to Jesus' prophecy in today's gospel about the destruction of Jerusalem and the woes to come, you might not have thought of a song sung by Fred Astaire, trying to persuade Ginger Rogers to dance. But when I read the passage myself and was looking for a title, "Trouble ahead" seemed to jump out and I immediately thought of this song. The topic today is not one that is likely to make us feel happier or more confident about the future. But while there are many things about life that we can't control, what we can choose is how to respond to the ups and downs of life. And in this passage Jesus urges us to have faith in God, whatever may come. Or, in the words of the song, to "face the music and dance".

Expectations

Which of these situations do you expect to experience in your lifetime? Which do you NOT expect to experience?

- Ill health (physical or mental)
- Bereavement (of any kind)
- War
- Economic collapse
- Severe food shortages
- An epidemic such as Ebola or cholera
- Persecution for your faith

We measure life against our expectations. Christmas is a classic case: people have very different ideas about how you should celebrate Christmas – what is important, even essential, and what is not. Children particularly have high expectations of the presents they want to receive, and will have made these expectations clear to parents and will be ripping open the wrapping paper on Christmas Day in great anticipation. A carefully chosen present that wasn't what they wanted will lead to disappointment.

Our relationships are a really important case in point too – what do we expect from our partner, our family, our friends? How let down do we feel when someone we love fails to meet a key expectation of ours?

What about our lives? We may hope that we will have a happy family, a good job, good health and that our country will be well run, with all the essential amenities accessible to us. But do we expect these things as our right? And who do we blame when we or someone we love gets a serious illness, when relationships are stressful, when the dream job doesn't work out?

And what about God? What do we expect from God, either for ourselves or for the world? Is our faith deeply rooted and strong to stand the test of adversity and provide us with an anchor in the

¹ "Let's Face the Music and Dance" is a song written in 1936 by [Irving Berlin](#) for the film [Follow the Fleet](#), where it was introduced by [Fred Astaire](#) and featured in a celebrated dance duet with Astaire and [Ginger Rogers](#). (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Let%27s_Face_the_Music_and_Dance, 17/11/2019)

storm, or do we blame God for not looking after us when things go wrong? In Jesus' well-known Parable of the Sower, some seed fell on rocky ground, and sprouted initially, only to shrivel up in the hot sun because it had no depth of soil for the roots to reach down to find the moisture. Jesus compared this to people whose faith is full of enthusiasm at first, but is too shallow to withstand the challenges of life, so that they fall away and give up.

Trouble ahead

In our Gospel passage today, Jesus' disciples are admiring the impressive and beautiful Temple in Jerusalem. They are on a high after Jesus' triumphal entry into the city, and their hopes have been raised that their Messiah will usher in the Kingdom of God. Jesus' response must have been like a body blow to their expectations: "Do you see all this?" he asks. "This will all be pulled down, and not one stone will be left on top of another."



Jesus goes on to predict further sufferings in the future: not only will there be wars, famines, earthquakes and political upheaval, but the Church itself, the body of believers who will emerge from his first disciples, will be persecuted. They will be brought before synagogues and secular rulers, imprisoned and even killed for belonging to him.



Stones from the ruined Temple

What Jesus prophesied came true. In AD 70 The Romans, responding to a nationwide insurrection by the Jews, captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. But even before that, the Church was under pressure. As Jesus' disciples took the gospel out throughout the Roman Empire, they often met opposition, both from fellow-Jews and from secular authorities. If you know the

Acts of the Apostles, you'll be familiar with St Paul's experience of being thrown out of synagogues, arrested, beaten, imprisoned, stoned and finally (according to tradition) executed for his faith. In the following centuries Christians were frequently tortured or threatened with being thrown to wild beasts or executed to make them renounce their faith. The period up to the Emperor Constantine's decision to legitimise Christianity is littered with martyrdoms.

The same story continues in many countries today, particularly China and many Muslim-majority countries. One of our church charities, the Barnabas Fund, exists to support Christians who are the victims of intimidation or persecution either by state officials or by those of other religions among whom they live.

As for wars, famines and earthquakes, these are things that we are familiar with in our day. Some people ask why, if Jesus came to save the world, the world doesn't seem to be very much better now than it was 2,000 years ago. And of course there's that old question about why God, if he is good and all-powerful, allows suffering in the world. I'm not going to try to answer that now, but I do think it's worth asking why we, as a human race, continue to allow suffering, much of which we cause through war, injustice, climate change etc, and most of the rest of which we could alleviate if we put half as much effort thought and money into it as we put into devising the best computer games, trading systems and weapons for killing each other. My understanding of God from the Bible is that he has given us dominion of the planet and expects us to run it responsibly. He is very willing to help us, but isn't going to fix all our problems with a sweep of his magic wand.

So what are our expectations of God? And where do they come from – the Bible, our own ideas, what we've picked up from others? Given that there are problems in the world, how are we going to understand them from the point of view of our Christian faith? Personally, I think that there is

no substitute for studying the Bible (individually and with others) if we want to have a better idea of what God is like and how we can expect him to be involved in the world and our lives. And equally important is praying about situations in the world and in our lives, asking the Holy Spirit to guide our prayers.

So I think one message from today's reading is that Jesus does not promise us an easy ride – either in our personal lives or in the wider realms of politics, nature, or the well-being of the church. But rather than making a shallow, simplistic response to the troubles of the world, let's study and pray so that our thinking and actions can be aligned with God's will for his world and our lives.

A second, equally important point emerges from Jesus' words, where he speaks about persecution. People of faith who see the world from God's point of view and try to live according to the teaching of Jesus are always liable to be misunderstood, ridiculed or opposed by others. We are unlikely in this country to be imprisoned or tortured for our faith, but where our beliefs come into conflict with the beliefs, values and lifestyles of society around us we may be called to account. In some public sector professions Christians have already faced discrimination in our country. Even in your family or circle of friends you may be considered old-fashioned, out of touch or politically incorrect. Are we willing to stand up for what we believe, trusting in God to help us?

And thinking of the persecuted church worldwide, Jesus' comments invite us to ask, are we in solidarity with other believers who suffer? I have already mentioned the Barnabas Fund. Why not go on their website <https://barnabasfund.org/en>, read and pray about our brothers and sisters who are under pressure in other places, and maybe consider whether you could support them in prayer and financially?

Facing the music

So as we come to terms with the reality of suffering in the world, and the prospect that there may be more trouble ahead, what message of hope can we take away today? Jesus finishes his warning with these words: "by your endurance you will gain your souls" (19). What does this mean? You might think he means, "you will save your lives", but Jesus has already warned that some will be put to death. A fuller translation would be, "Through your unflinching endurance you will gain true life for yourselves". The word translated "soul" or "life" is the Greek *psyche* (from which we get psychology, etc). It means life, soul, your true self. It's the word used in Luke 9:25 where Jesus asks, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?" (NIV). We need to be true to who we are as Christians, to maintain our integrity. And to do that we need endurance. The Greek word has a strong meaning. We need to hold on to God in faith, trusting him to see us through and to make everything come right in the end. Don't give up your faith. The tougher things are, the more tightly we need to hold on to God.

There may be trouble ahead... As we gather here today to worship God there may not be moonlight and romance but there certainly is music and love for each other and for God. So let's take heart, face the music and dance!

Jesus told his disciples, the night before he died, "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face affliction². But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33). And his final words to his disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel, after commissioning them to spread the gospel and make disciples, is "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

² The Greek word actually means pressure, therefore affliction, oppression or persecution are all possible translations.