

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 1 December 2024 – Advent 1 (Year C)
Jer.33.14-16; Ps 25.1-10; I Thess 3.9-13; Luke 21.25-36

Disruptors

We are living through an age of disruptors - people who openly subvert or disrupt the way things are or have been and tell us that everything needs shaking up. New brooms sweep clean and all that. And disruptors come in all kinds of shapes and sizes. Some of them are familiar. We have our own Nigel Farage and his Reform party, tapping into a sense of grievance and resentment, especially about the levels of immigration. Across the Atlantic Donald Trump is tearing up the playbook, promising to impose stiff trade tariffs, get rid of whole areas of government and stop the Ukraine war in twenty-four hours. Good luck with that. He too taps into the same pool of grievance and resentment, about illegal immigration, woke policy-making and a sense that America has lost its way. Populist disruptors like these are quick to pounce on the problems, which I can't help thinking are much, much easier to identify than to solve. They tend to fixate on particular groups of people they see as the cause of all the difficulties, in both these cases migrants and the political establishment. There's no doubt that the western world does have a serious issue to face with these mass movements of people, which is a global, not a national problem. The rise of disruptors has happened before, in living memory even, with Fascism in the twenties and thirties, but it seems inconvenient to remember and learn from that.

I think of people like Farage and Trump as negative disruptors. They are good when it comes to pointing out the tensions and dangers which face us, but their vision for the future tends to be backward-looking, to some supposed golden age in the past - making America great *again*, or getting our country back. It remains to be seen if the second Trump presidency manages to solve any of the problems it has promised to without creating new ones. Does all this represent a crisis of faith in our democratic traditions? I think it does. Democracy as we know it is by its very nature messy, and it's perhaps not surprising that so many people are seduced by the siren song of sweeping out the Augean Stables (to mix my classical metaphors). And all this is happening when, by common consent, the world has become a more dangerous and

unpredictable place and the spectre of global conflicts looms ever larger. It can feel quite apocalyptic, and if you are living in Gaza or Lebanon or Sudan or Ukraine, or any other place where missiles rain down on the population, it most certainly is. Wars and rumours of war, signs ushering in the end times, did Jesus of Nazareth say? This reading from Luke is one of several places in the Gospels where Jesus, now in Jerusalem and facing the greatest test of his life, speaks of terrible things about to happen across the world before the final victory of God. But he also warns people about those who come in his name preaching the end of the world.

My mind goes back to my schooldays. One afternoon, after lessons were over, I went to the school Christian Union meeting. An elderly man (so I thought then) was the guest speaker. He had brought with him a number of large sheets of paper in which, in a beautiful if tiny writing, he had calculated from Daniel and the Book of Revelation exactly when the End would take place. As I see those sheets of paper now in my memory's eye they were like a work of art. He must have laboured for months or years checking everything to make sure his predictions were correct. I remember feeling admiration for his effort and commitment but scepticism about the whole project. Alas, I don't recall when the End was supposed to happen.

People still engage in this kind of speculation, despite the warning of Jesus and failing to grasp that the Book of Revelation belongs to a particular literary genre, apocalyptic, with its own codes and characteristics. When I used to teach my students Spanish seventeenth-century drama, especially plays in which husbands murdered their wives because of unfounded suspicion and jealousy, they would assume that such things were normal in those days. So I would ask them what to expect if they went to see a James Bond film. They'd say a power-hungry individual wanting to take over or destroy the world from a secret base, a double agent, a beautiful woman who might also be that agent and who would be seduced by Bond, a car or boat chase, martinis shaken not stirred, incredible escapes from danger and the defeat of evil at the end. When you go to see any Bond film the ingredients tend to be the same and you go expecting to find them and enjoy them. It was a way of getting them to understand that these old dramas had their own conventions – accidental meetings, partly overheard conversations, encounters in the dark – and took you through a gamut

of emotions in the space of a couple of hours. The same is true of apocalyptic writing, with its roots in the Old Testament prophets, especially Ezekiel and Daniel, and which flourished most of all in the centuries between the two Testaments. You get warnings of terrible things to come, portents in the heavens, monstrous beings, magic numbers, a supernatural struggle between the forces of good and evil in which good triumphs, though at great cost to the lives of many. It comes into its own when people are fearful and uncertain, especially in times of terror, war and persecution. The English Civil War, for example, witnessed a notable upsurge in apocalyptic preaching and prophecy. Such is the setting of the Book of Revelation and of the little apocalypses in the Gospels. The first Christians are being hunted down and martyred and Revelation is written to encourage them to hold fast, because in the end the victory will be theirs. The whole fabric of the world is being shaken, disrupted, so the call comes to be alert to what is going on around you and pray for strength to withstand whatever comes your way.

This is heavy stuff. But it tells us that what is going on in the world around us needs our attention. We can't close our eyes and ears to it in the hope that it will go away and we can get back to where we were. We are living in a time of the shaking of the foundations, and it is all too easy to get swept away by cheap rhetoric, glib solutions and all the other snake-oil salesmen who demand our attention. My mother sometimes observes that anticipation of a holiday is sometimes almost as good as the holiday itself, because once it begins you know it will soon be over. It's true of Christmas as well. Which of us is immune to Christmas displays and decorations and isn't transported back for a moment to the magic of the season we felt as children? But once Christmas arrives, the presents are opened and the turkey is eaten there can be a real sense of anticlimax. We've been building up to it for weeks and now it's over. Small children go from eager anticipation to tears and tantrums and the rest of us breathe a sigh and slowly get back to normal. There is a particular magic about the season of Advent in the Christian year – the music, the candles, the sense that something is in the air which is going to make a difference to us and to our world. And then, before we know it, we're back to the endless diet of depressing news and the pedestrian realities of our own lives. One thing we should remember is that

Christmas Day is not the end of the celebrations in Christian time. The season lasts through Epiphany until Candlemas at the beginning of February. But instead of a time of anticipation it becomes one of unfolding, of a gradual revelation of what this birth among us means. The pattern of birth, ministry, death and resurrection weaves itself into our own lives as the year continues. In Advent, therefore, we are not looking forward only to Christmas Day, but to another year in which the Christ whose birth we shall celebrate will unfold more and more of his disruptive grace.

You should never doubt that Jesus is a disruptor, in the tradition of John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophets; but a positive, rather than a negative one. The nature of his disruption, his questioning of the way things are, is the opposite of the power-hungry individuals who need the adoration of the masses to feed their insatiable egos. He has harsh words for those who cling to power and status and turn religion into a means of control. He gives priority to the spirit over the letter of the Law. He hangs out with the little people and reaches out to those who feel ignored. He speaks of the restorative power of forgiveness over the endless cycle of retaliation and revenge. He brings a healing touch to those who are hurt. He is the living embodiment of mercy, compassion and love. For such things, of course, he has to pay the price, in his own flesh and blood. But that does not stop him, not then, not now. Those of us foolish or courageous enough to identify ourselves as his people look to his words and actions to keep us true to his way. He is there in the silence of our hearts, in our longings and our questionings; he is there when we gather together in his name, to find inspiration for serving him better; he is present wherever the human spirit is broken crushed by human cruelty and greed, and from its suffering asks us ‘Is this the world you want?’

If you are troubled by the voices which sow discord and division in the human family, or by those who preach short-term gain for the few over care for our damaged planet, remember that here, as in every church and congregation throughout the world, we cherish an alternative vision and come week by week to find the strength to live day by day by the alternative vision. For we too are called to be disruptors: disruptors of the lies and half-truths and weasel words by which the powerful justify their privileges; quietly but firmly witnessing to his better way. I recently came across

these words of the American poet Adrienne Riche, who died in 2012. If they ring true in your heart, as they do in mine, let them stand as our credo of Christian disruption:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
 so much has been destroyed.
 I have to cast my lot with those
 who, age after age, perversely,
 with no extraordinary power,
 reconstitute the world.

Prayers Advent Sunday 2024

We have gathered here in hope and expectation; but of what?
 Do we hope for words of comfort and refreshment?
 Do we expect answers to our questions and certainties to silence them?
 In this season of Advent, teach us, Lord, to look in the right places:
 not in the brittle worlds of celebrity and success,
 or the seductive worlds of power and plenty,
 but deep in the longings of the human heart;
 for a peace the world as we know it is not able to give;
 for a hope which goes beyond the satisfaction of our appetites;
 for a love which does not build walls to shut people out
 But keeps an open door to let them all honest seekers in.
 Teach us to look for you in stables and outhouses,
 in forgotten corners and places easy to overlook,
 lest we miss your coming and mistake your purpose,
 which shines its light even in the darkest times,
 and asks only that we let it into our hearts. Amen,

Have mercy on us, Lord,
 for we do not always heed your words.
 Have mercy on us when we follow familiar ways
 and let our unchecked emotions lead us.
 Have mercy on us when we lose hope
 because there is so much to depress us.
 Save us from habits which are harmful
 and attitudes which are hurtful,
 for without your help we are condemned
 to repeat our mistakes time and again.
 Lord, have mercy upon us....

