



Sunday 2 November 2014
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
Sung Eucharist
1 Thessalonians 2 vv. 9–13
Matthew 24 vv. 1–14

Even unto Armageddon
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'Even unto Armageddon, the British Constitution would be preserved'

Earlier this week secret files were released from 1982 in which the Home Office ran a war game scenario, named Regenerate, seeking to test the UK's capacity to rebuild society after a massive nuclear attack. It was all frankly pretty bizarre, and included the suggestion from a Junior staff member about the potentially useful role that, of all people, psychopaths might usefully play in such circumstances. Commenting on the scenario, an expert on the British Constitution and member of this College, Peter Hennessy, pointed out that under such circumstances the Prime Minister and the Queen would, by necessity, be in different locations, hence his observation: Even unto Armageddon, the British Constitution would be preserved.

Apocalyptic scenarios, whether bizarre government pre-enactments, the imaginings of novelists – like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* trilogy, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or older works like Nevil Shute *On the Beach* or J Ballard's *The Drowned World* – or myriad other examples across a variety of media all provide a mirror to society; to ourselves; to our sense of who we are and to WHAT REALLY MATTERS when it comes down to it, when all else is stripped away, in the cold light of day – at the end, the very end of the day: In threatening and lawless times, when all social norms have broken down – when, as Matthew puts it, love grows cold.

Whilst tongue in cheek, Hennessy's comment reminds us of just how unthinkable it is to exist without social order or certain institutions, in his case, possibly ours, the monarchy.

Jesus's account of the apocalypse is set against the background of the destruction of the key social and religious institution of his world – the Jewish Temple; it encapsulated the very foundation and touchstone of Jewish identity – the British Constitution and the Twin towers of New York prior to 9/11 and more - wrapped into one. Massive, solid, with in modern parlance a very impressive 'footfall', not just of people but of animals to be killed, it was centre-piece of the Jewish religious system – and yet as Jesus predicted 'not one stone would be left here upon another' after the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 AD. It is difficult to underestimate the sheer unthinkableness in the Jewish imagination that this might actually happen.

It is against this apocalyptic backdrop, that Jesus outlines a familiar portrayal of the chaos and anarchy which occurs in the absence of social stability and good order. What he is describing is the time of trial – when the moral character of a human being is severely tested – very few of us are ever brought to such a moment - cocooned by our times and circumstances, even – who knows - by the British Constitution. We may fantasize about our own moral heroism had we been there on D-Day, in the concentration camps, the gulags, in the frontline tackling Ebola or a hundred other scenarios. We may imagine; but we cannot know whether our love would grow cold, whether we would betray others to save our skins, whether our integrity would slough off like the snake's skin or whether we would endure - whatever the cost.

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Apocalyptic scenarios and imaginings provide us with a lens, they allow us a focused moment to reflect on what really matters when all supports for identity and community are stripped away and we stand in the face the time of trial, of judgement, the judgment of us, our words and actions, our desires and inner motivations; a moment to reflect on who we truly are or might be.

‘Lead us not to the time of trial’ is another way of translating the more familiar ‘lead us not into temptation’. Trial and temptation are deeply connected: For integrity and moral courage – perhaps another way of construing love – may be uncovered and revealed most dramatically by the extremity of circumstance, the judgement of the time of trial; but the ground is prepared through the small acts of moral courage, the quiet everyday decisions we take and the actions we engage in; a capacity for moral courage, which can help love endure even in loveless times can only ever be nurtured in the here and now, day by day in response to the grace of God, and there is only, ever, one person who has to choose whether to respond to that challenge and invitation.

Amen