

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev. Geoff Read on Sunday 18th November 2018

Text: Mark 13:1-8

VUCA is an acronym that was first used in the post-Cold War era to describe the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous emerging world order. It catches well the times we are living in now

Each element finds a counter reaction – for example the U that is the Uncertainty of complex, inter-related global issues is countered, not surprisingly by Certainty.

But the danger lies in that people may settle for any certainty, a dangerous simplicity, which may be why we have seen the rise of In-Out referendums, nationalism, scapegoating and also religious fundamentalism

Jesus says in our gospel: READ v5

The context is how, in the few days before his death, Jesus walked and taught in the Jerusalem Temple. As his disciples walked with him, they remarked to Jesus about the beauty, grandeur and apparent permanence of the Temple (Mk 13:1).

But according to Jesus: READ 13:2

This is followed by extraordinary teaching by Jesus on the end times and is recorded by Mark in what is called “the little apocalypse” that makes up the whole of Ch 13.

First Jesus spoke of the immediate End Times for the city and Temple of Jerusalem, predicting it's destruction by the Roman forces a few short decades later (v14 on)

The Temple, which seems so strong, so permanent, so lasting is, in fact, not

He then raises the perspective to the world around, the created order, human institutions, political and cultural systems and predicts the same thing: what seems so solid and permanent will in fact one day come to an end when God comes in power to judge, to renew (v20ff).

We too live in the end times – the period between Jesus' first coming and his second coming: no-one knows when that second coming will be, but only that come He will

But on that day and in the days leading up to it Jesus says “do not be deceived” and “do not be alarmed”: READ v5, 7

Being taken in by deception and becoming alarmed are two reactions that make us vulnerable to circumstances and vulnerable to others who may wish to manipulate us to their own advantage

What Jesus warns against is a double deception: firstly, those who come falsely in Jesus' name and secondly those claiming to actually be him

The deception of coming in Jesus' name is about claiming His authority but failing to act according to His ways of love and truth

The deception of claiming to actually be Him is about claiming his identity, to be the Messiah, and is something that is more difficult for us to understand.

But it becomes clearer when we remember that the context is one of suffering and longing among the Jews of Jesus' day for the coming of the long-promised Messiah, ending of Roman rule and bringing in God's rule – Jesus is talking to people made vulnerable to suggestion through their longing for change

I'd like to focus on the first deception, "claiming to come in Jesus' name", because avoiding this is what lies at the heart of all the energy that our church, like all others in the Diocese and the Church of England put into our policy and procedures for care of those who by age or circumstances find themselves vulnerable: what we commonly call safeguarding

Pause and think how some core Christian teachings, for example loving your neighbor as yourself, can so easily become twisted and manipulated in small, counter-cultural communities which is what churches are

Read a book like *Holy Fools* by the Joanna Harris, the author of *Chocolat*

Or take the example that came to light in 2012 in a convent near Oxford in UK when a lay care assistant meant to be nursing elderly and infirm nuns was charged with physically abusing them.

In court the Mother Superior spoke of the complexity of getting sisters to speak up about this. She remarked on how those sisters had been trained in their spiritual formation to expect, endure and even welcome suffering.

How carefully we should handle a passage like this in the light of that comment: READ v9-10

But where in the community of Jesus does endurance end and abuse begin?

Where does discernment end and deception begin?

And how can we train young and old alike in a discipleship able to freely embrace and endure a God-given suffering but recognize and resist, not be deceived by what claims to come in Jesus' name but acts in a way very different from how He would?

"Watch out that no-one deceives you... Many will come in my name"

The clear implication is that many will try to deceive Christ's followers in different ways and for different ends, and that here is a danger to be guarded against actively and by the stronger watching out for the weaker

"Many will come in my name": names in Jesus day were more than labels; they were descriptions of qualities and purpose. His own name, *Yeshua*, means "God to the rescue".

And to come in the name of another is to bring and to live those same qualities as the

named one: the Jesus whose way is not one of exploitation or manipulation but of self-sacrifice, self-giving and putting the needs of the other ahead of his own, of truth and transparency rather than anything ever being “just our little secret”

Un-Jesus like behavior should cause us to “watch out”

To come in Jesus’ name is also about authority and exercising that authority in a Christ-like way

If you look at the most notorious recent examples in both the wider world and the church one commonality is a powerful, charismatic personality abusing power in relationships: be it a wacky TV personality or Film maker who is a gatekeeper to a celebrity lifestyle or an Anglican Bishop like Peter Ball mishandling mystery and others’ vocational promises

Just a few months ago at my licensing as chaplain I made binding promises to our Bishop, expressing a relationship of voluntary but critical obedience – the obedience is “in all things lawful”

Relationships of all sorts in the church that are marked by inequalities of power must be handled on both sides with this healthy dose of critical thought

And it may be that in this very area in which we are rightly most concerned about the vulnerability of children, that the spirituality of children might show us the way

And it is through that most child-like of attitudes: asking questions, and in particular, the question why?

To honestly ask “why” and to ask it together until we become convinced that this suggestion, this request is truly a Christ-like one is an empowering thing

To ask “why”, to ensure that we are not deceived, is not a challenge to authority, but to seek to understand so that we can discern between true claims and false

To ask “why” is also to ensure that where this thing asked is of Christ in our communities and in our lives, any suffering that follows can be embraced and endured with purpose and hope

But where there is secrecy or manipulation, exploitation and untruth, let’s recognize these things for what they are, either for ourselves and particularly for vulnerable others, speaking up and speaking out in ways fitting for those claiming to do so in Christ’s name