

Today is the first day of the Church's new year. Most of you will know that each year our Sunday Gospel reading is taken from a particular Gospel. In Year A it's Matthew, in Year B – which we've just had it's Mark (supplemented by bits of John), and in Year C, which we are just beginning it's Luke.

Earlier this week I was exploring the theology of Luke with a group of first-year curates from across the Oxford Diocese as they prepared to preach from this gospel for the first time. I've left a few of the handouts from that session at the back of the church in case any of you are interested in taking one. But this morning I want to explore something that isn't mentioned on that handout. It's Luke's special concern with the gaze of Jesus.

If you were to ask me what passage from Luke best sums up the whole Gospel I would say that it is the story of Zacchaeus, the little tax collector who climbs up a sycamore tree because he is trying to see 'who Jesus was'. And the great irony of that story is that Jesus looks up and sees Zacchaeus for who he is, and more than that – for who he has the potential to become – someone who can stand tall because through meeting Jesus his life has been turned around and he has found himself able to do the right thing.

We find a similar pattern in the story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet. She is judged by others because she is a sex worker and because Jesus seems to tolerate her they assume that he is blind to her character. Instead he turns the tables on them and he asks his host, Simon the Pharisee, the significant question, 'Do you see this woman?' 'Do you see this woman?' And he then paints quite a different picture, that of a Christian disciple whose sins have been forgiven and who shows him great love and devotion. He says, 'Look again – look with my eyes.'

Elsewhere in Luke's Gospel Jesus' looking is linked with compassion. He sees a widow at the funeral of her only son and, we are told, his heart

goes out to her and he raises the young man from the dead. This linking of looking with compassion is also to be found in the stories of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. The father sees his son struggling homewards and his heart is moved; the Samaritan sees the injured man on the road to Jericho and his heart is moved. We are meant to understand this look of compassion as the divine gaze: God looks on humanity in our distress and he sends his son – recall the prayer we often say at the end of our communion service ‘You met us in your son and brought us home.’

Perhaps most tellingly, it is only Luke who includes a particular detail in the story of Jesus’ passion:

They seized Jesus and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Only Peter knew what was in that gaze of Jesus. But from what we know of his look elsewhere and the reconciliation that took place after the resurrection we can be pretty sure that compassion was a part of it.

Today's Gospel reading is a pretty brutal introduction to Luke, concerned as it is with the coming tribulation before the Day of the Lord, but it too is about Jesus' gaze. In Luke's Gospel Jesus makes a very long and winding journey from his home in Galilee to Jerusalem; much of his ministry – including his encounter with Zacchaeus – takes place en route. As he approaches Jerusalem and sees it for the first time he weeps, tears of frustration, compassion, and ultimately rejected love. Later when he is in the Temple he looks around and, while others are engrossed with the decorations and sacrifices, his gaze alights on a poor widow who is placing a small amount in the Temple Treasury and, yet again, he sees her for who she is and her action for what it is.

And then his vision becomes more expansive and he acts literally like a seer – a prophet. He sees The Temple in which they are standing razed to the ground and Jerusalem laid waste; he sees natural disasters and immense suffering. And interestingly, he doesn't claim that he is doing it because he has some kind of supernatural power. It's as if he's saying 'It's not rocket science: if you could only look properly and read the signs of the times you would see that disaster is around the corner. And if you could only look properly at me and see who I am you will realise that, though I am compassionate, I am also just, and some day soon I will be coming to judge this world.'

How soon is 'soon'? This is a question Jesus' disciples ask him after the resurrection at the beginning of Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, and he replies that it is not for them to know but they are to live well with the help of the Holy Spirit as they wait for end of the age. I'm in the middle of writing a book that argues that Christian spirituality boils down to this – living well as we grieve the loss of the earthly Jesus and await our reunion with him, a reunion which will be full of joy but in which we will also have to give an account of ourselves to the one who sees

through us, as he did with Peter. It means being attentive to his words in the Bible, working out what they mean for us here and now, and as part of that being attentive to the signs of the times.

The season of Advent has been designed by the church to help us to do just this. Perhaps it is not too difficult this year, as we look around us at the effects of climate change, violence, poverty, social exclusion on our in the English Channel and across the globe; vicious culture wars and divisions in our society; and now a new coronavirus variant just in time for Christmas. It would be only natural for us to wonder of the end of the age has finally come, and certainly to wonder what the future holds.

In this light we need to appreciate what we have; in the words of the hymn-writer Thomas Ken, to live each day as if it were our last – not so much in fear but with deep gratitude and focused purpose. This means, like Jesus, looking at life with compassion, insight, and realism so that we can set our priorities rightly.

So, I invite you to spend this Advent asking yourself 'What and who are really important to me at this point in my life; what might God be calling me to do here and now?' and, trusting in the help of the Holy Spirit, to get on and do it.