Cathedral 161114

Anxious people – people who are afraid – are hard to communicate with and hard to work with. Anxious people tend to be preoccupied. You speak with them but they are restless – eyes and mind always moving. Anxious people – people who are afraid – tend to react to what they see and what they fear. They aren’t so good at committing and trusting.

Today’s readings have a sense of the end looming up. We are coming to the end of the year of liturgy, reading and worship – another year begins on Advent Sunday - two weeks away. And the year doesn’t just come to an end – it moves towards a reminder that the end of all things is coming.

As Zephaniah says, ‘The Day of the Lord is at hand’ And Paul writing to the Thessalonians says that the Day of the Lord will come ‘like a thief in the night’ – sudden destruction – no escape.

So the question which faces us as we reflect on these readings – and reflect on the times we live in – is where we may find peace and security.

And the answer seems to be that the things in which we invest our desire for peace and security will always prove unfaithful. Before I give you some examples – I think I need to say that they sound pessimistic. And I think we should greatly prize faithfulness, constancy, optimism and resilience.

As we move on from Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day – I see Neville Chamberlain and his piece of paper – ‘Peace for our time’. And as we think about the economic meltdown through which we have been living, one hears, ‘Safe as the Bank of England’. And I think of all the times I have been with families around a hospital bed – and registered the almost desperate need of people to say, ‘Of course it’s going to be all right – of course you’ll get better’

We yearn for peace and security. I remember one of the realities of growing into adult life – of gathering marriage, children and now grandchildren – that there is a sense in which the greater the love the greater the vulnerability.

The man in the Gospel reading who goes on a trip wants peace and security for his property. So he entrusts it to his servants – who look after it some with more success than others.

In the end, what all this is about is the quest for peace and security which can be trusted. Our experience is that that can’t be found in wistful longing or in theories or in assumptions that what has been will always be. If the future is as the readings today tell us it will be, then peace and security will only be found in ultimate truths – in something or someone who has the capacity to make it real. Paul says that that means that we should find our security in the God who raised Jesus from the dead – a reality big enough to transcend all uncertainties, all failures, all that is partial and temporary.

Of course the ultimate question is whether this is true for me. It’s the same question as I used to face week in and week out as I preached at the funerals of my parishioners and proclaimed – almost shouted – resurrection hope into the emptiness of their loss and grief. The question is not, ‘Is this a nice idea’ The question is ‘Is this true for me – today and for ever’

I have spent much of my life living in places and times of great uncertainty. As all of us who exercise a pastoral ministry, I have spent endless time with people at moments when their lives were breaking apart. And I have watched the almost instinctive wish of people in those moments to invest their desire of peace and security in the love and the faithfulness of God. One of the psalms set for today contains the line ‘Lord you have been our refuge from one generation to another.’ And in yesterday’s Guardian, Giles Fraser quoted lines from Philip Larkin’s poem ‘Church Going’ – about the death of the church and of buildings which become ‘rent free to rain and sheep’ Yet he returns to the persistence of faith – the persistent desire to invest our longing for peace and security in the wonder and majesty of God – reflecting that

‘a place where all our compulsions meet

Never can be obsolete

Since someone will for ever be surprising

A hunger in himself to be more serious’