

# PUT IT IN YOUR HEART

KATHLEEN RUSHTON introduces the apocalyptic writing in Luke 21:5-19 and suggests how it can help us think about and act on the crises of our times.

In a recent *New Zealand Listener*, religious thinker and author Karen Armstrong wrote about the tendency across world religions today to read scripture in a literal way. Premodern readers, in contrast, had a much more inventive and mystical approach to reading sacred texts. As the end of the liturgical year draws near, we have the opportunity to rediscover the art of scripture in the apocalyptic writings of Luke 21. The apocalyptic genre is found in biblical and non-canonical writings.

## Imagine a Different World

The word “apocalypse” means an “unveiling”. Vivid symbols and imagery serve to lift the veil of ordinary experience to reveal things as they really are. These writings

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word of God” which break into the situation of the pilgrim People of God who need encouragement or guidance or a call to conversion and recommitment. David Rhoads explains: “An apocalyptic stance is more radical than a prophetic stance. Prophecy calls for a reform of the current order. Apocalyptic literature challenges readers to question the core values that make the society work and dares its readers to imagine a different world.”

We need to resist reading Jesus’s words in Luke 21:5–19 in an exclusively literal way. They’re sharp, harsh words and in vivid imagery portray a difficult destiny, a sense of time running out, impending judgement, expectations of “the end” and the meaning of “the in-between” times. While we can’t easily make sense of Jesus’s message today, his sense of urgency and insistence will speak to us. Never in the history of

humankind has the Earth community been as alert to a global crisis of such social, economic and ecological proportions as now.

## Three Stages of the Gospels

Luke 21 oscillates backwards and forwards and inwards and outwards into the mystery of Jesus who in his humanity unveils the mystery of God. In unpacking this chapter, it is helpful to recall the three stages of the formation of the Gospels: stage 1: the time of Jesus and his life in Earth; stage 2: the time of the oral tradition when the Risen Jesus was proclaimed in the preaching of the disciples (30s–70s CE); and stage 3: the time when the four Gospels were written (70s–90s).

These stages are implicit in Luke 21. The first part (Lk 21:5–24) addresses the hard times experienced by Luke’s community in the Roman Empire in the 80s, about 50 years after Jesus’s death (stage 3). Jerusalem

had fallen and the Temple had been destroyed (70 CE). Jesus is presented in Luke 21 using symbols and imagery to talk about those events as if they were still in the future. The gospel drama itself, however, is set in Jesus's lifetime (stage 1). The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple had not yet happened (stage 2). The second part (Lk 21:25–36) creates confidence for yet another time of Jesus – now, our present and future time when we glimpse him so we may “stand with confidence before the Son of Humanity”.

### Jesus in Jerusalem

Jesus's long journey to Jerusalem ends. Large crowds welcome him into Jerusalem (Lk 19:28–40). Once there he weeps over the city, cleanses the Temple and teaches even though the leaders watch him and send out spies (Lk 19–20). Jesus watches “the rich people putting their gifts into the treasury” and the poor widow giving all she has (Lk 21:1–4). All was not well with the Temple system.

The disciples are in awe at the beauty of the Temple (Lk 21:5). Rightly it was considered one of the most beautiful buildings in the Roman Empire. Jesus's vivid description of the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk 20:20–24) recalls historical events which for Luke's community had already happened. In the spring of 70 CE, the Roman General Titus captured and destroyed the city and the Temple. Even now in Rome we can see Judean captives carrying the seven-branched candlestick and other treasures from the Temple embossed on the Triumphal Arch of Titus built to celebrate this victory.

### For Our Reflection

We read and reflect on Scripture in our quest for God's mission in our times which will bring us to moral and spiritual transformation and ethical action to change the way things are. We seek to ponder the Word of God in our hearts as Mary did before she decided on the right actions for her (Lk 2:19, 51). I offer three suggestions for our own pondering which may inspire and help us imagine the transformations needed in our time.

Jesus warns of the times when “you have the opportunity to testify” (Lk 21:13). In facing those times Jesus warns: “Beware lest you be deceived” (Lk 21:8) and “do not panic” (Lk 21:9). Luke is concentrating on the community's suffering during the days of hardship, persecution, destruction, wars, earthquakes, famines and plagues. What happened to Jesus and his disciples in their time is written as if it happened in the time of Luke's hearers and through the living Word as in our time today. We can ponder the suffering of people and lands devastated by war, forests burnt for pastoral development, oceans used for waste disposal, species habitats ruined and imagine a restored world. We can learn from the ignorance of the past, the abuse of power and wilful destruction and work together now to halt the damage and restore health within Earth.

After the invitation in Lk 21:5–13 of “a chance for you to bear witness”, we are asked to “put it in your hearts” (this is the literal Greek, as opposed to “keep this carefully in mind” (JB) or “make up your minds” (NRSV)). This echoes what Elizabeth's and Zechariah's neighbours felt at John's birth: “All the ones hearing *put in their heart*” (Lk 1:66). We can understand this as heart stuff – our quest for God and for transformation – something that is definitely relevant for us today. Jesus continues promising the Holy Spirit

“for I will give you speech [literally, a mouth] and a wisdom . . . you shall gain possession of your lives by your *consistent resistance*” (Lk 21:19). It is by pondering and evaluating the information available to us in light of the overall gospel message that we commit to a new way – to action with others to relieve suffering and allow life to grow.

It is this “consistent resistance” (usually translated as “patient endurance”) that challenges us today. It suggests a positive, courageous, unyielding, loving, responsive lifelong perseverance to resist ways that destroy and dare to imagine and act on life-giving options for the common good of the Earth community.

We read scripture in mystical and inventive ways in our quest for God in order to be transformed to take little steps to live with wonder, respect and reverence for people and all life in Earth in our challenging social, economic and ecological times. 🌱

17 November Luke 21:5–19  
RL 33rd Sunday Ordinary Time  
RCL 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

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