

Ephesians 1:11-19

Psalm 149

Luke 6:20-31

Permacrisis and the people of God

In a sentence:

The one crisis (judgement) in faith is the cross of Christ, by which God judges all human judgement to make straight our way to him

To speak of “All Saints” is to speak of an identity – of knowing who we are or, at least, who the saints are! But this is more than a label. Who we are has to do with where we are, who we are with, and what we do. Identity has to do with a situation, a condition. What, then, is the human situation and the condition of the saints?

In the last week, the little owner of the sweetest singing voice in our house was heard to chime the following chorus,

*“you’ve got to get yourself together,
you’ve got stuck in a moment,
and now you can’t get out it”* (U2, “Stuck in a moment”).

(Mine is not the sweetest singing voice in the house!).

“Stuck in a moment”. This week the lexicologists at the Collins Dictionary announced their word of the year: *permacrisis*. I hadn’t heard that word until I read the announcement. Yet I knew straightaway what it meant – “an extended period of instability and insecurity – and I felt how appropriate a choice it was. The crises to which *permacrisis* points are, of course, very close to us all. Any one of the pandemic, Ukraine, #MeToo, inflation, floods, and heat waves would be crisis enough on top of the usual crises of family, work, and health. But laid one over the other, things are feeling fever-pitched. We might hope it’s a passing phase, except that I was struck by a comment in something else I read during the week, which remarked upon “the complex of modernity in which life knows itself to be at the mercy of a continuum of crisis” (Peter Sloterdijk). While that also seems to characterise today’s experience well, it was written *40 years ago*. If the commentator is correct, the problem is not the world in the early 2020s but a deeply rooted cultural experience: being stuck in a *milieu* that we “can’t get out of”.

In all of this, the crisis of *permacrisis* is an instability to which we must constantly respond – “perma” wars and rumours of wars. The world is continually upset as things refuse to stay where we put them, and we want desperately to put them back again if we can.

What does faith say here? The Bible knows crisis, yet it differs from the crises we know. Our word “crisis” comes, letter-for-letter, from a Greek word which, in the New Testament, is typically translated as “judgement”:

And this is the judgment [crisis], that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil (John 3.19)

The Father judges [crisis-es] no one but has given all judgment [crisis] to the Son (John 5.22)

The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment [crisis] with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! (Luke 11.32)

This is evidence of the righteous judgment [crisis] of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering (2 Thessalonians 1.5)

That is, a biblical “crisis” is not accidental but something *intended*, something *God* brings. The crises taking place around us are occasional – natural disasters or things we have done to each other that cause the world to go to smash. Biblical crises are deliberate interpretations of natural and historical conditions and crises; it is God who is smashing stuff. By themselves, natural and historical crises are things to be “coped with” and managed – occasions for getting ourselves together. Biblical crises *reveal*: “*this* is the crisis, this is the judgement, this is the setting right”. We don’t “cope with” crises like this; we live with them as a given condition.

Such a crisis is folded into our Gospel reading today – Luke 6.20-31. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those reviled for Jesus’ sake. Woe to the rich, the full, the comfortable, and the well-reputed. This crisis-inducing judgement upsets the world, for now, we might wonder anxiously, Am we among the blessed or the cursed? The crisis is not, “How can we hold it all together?” but “When it all finally falls apart, where will we be found?” Luke, of course, is too simplistic here, in the way of the old prophets. God doesn’t do nuance, and so we can’t let ourselves off the hook too easily. To come to church and hear such a text is to have yet another extra crisis to “cope with” if we are to make ourselves safe, now from God.

This reveals the depth of the human situation, what we are really stuck in – not just our engrossing crises but the requirement for constant decision and assertion of ourselves in the face of the world, of other people and of God. This is our permacrisis: we are required to be the sufferers, the judges and the setters-right of ourselves in the world.

In our reading from Ephesians this morning, we heard of another crisis, much less explicit but real nonetheless. Here the crisis (the *judgement*) is, “I, God, know who you are... You are mine.” You – the saints of God – are “destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will” (1.11). This, in a wholly (and holy) new way, is the permacrisis of the gospel, the permanent judgement of the gospel. There is only one judgement, one moment of decision – that moment in which all judgements are collapsed into Jesus, and we are collapsed into him with them. This judgement is given that we might “hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory” (1.12). The “praise of this glory” is not an orientation out of this crisis-plagued world, for the glory of Jesus is the cross, which God makes the crisis of crises, the judgement of judgement. In the cross, the rich one is made poor so that the poor might be made rich through judged judgement. Luke, with his inversion of the status of the rich and the poor, says to us that we don’t know ourselves: we judge each other wrongly, anxiously, exclusively and violently: crisis leading to crisis, judgement to judgement.

Against this, the gospel is that there is one judgement which matters – the judgement of all judgement which makes human life once more a gift and no longer an anxious work of self-justification. While we are so accustomed to self-knowledge and self-determination through self-judgement, we have in God a new witness to who we are. If, distracted by the crises, we forget God, God does not forget us. In the crisis of crises is found the life of the people of God. This is the moment we want to get stuck in: the permacrisis which is the gift of life, and which sets all other crises in perspective.

This is the crisis which would make saints of us and not just of us, but of the whole world.

To be such saints as this is to live as though all deathly judgement is behind us, and before us is only life.

Let us, then, live as saints: bearers of crisis-dissolving grace from God to each other and the world. And then we might see that the moment we are stuck in is nothing less than the coming of God's kingdom.
