

Raise your heads!*Luke 21:25-28*

It was overwhelming to see the reopened Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. This heart of French Catholicism, devastated by a cruel fire that burned its roof and steeple and interior, has been lovingly and carefully restored and refurbished, rebuilt and remodelled to remind us of the glory that was lost and now resurrected. The features that were blackened and bent and feared lost brought back to light and form and colour. The limestone on the floor and walls was carefully cleaned; 40,000 square metres of stone were cleaned, and help lift the light in the building. The stained-glass windows blackened by smoke and centuries of dust and dirt now glow with all the colours of the rainbow.

It was the wooden roof that burned – all 100 metres of it. None of the 800-year-old timbers survived. But the decision was quickly made to replace them as faithfully as possible – with oak from the forests of France. Some 1,200 oak trees had to be found, with the stipulation that they be straight, free from knots and a condition called "frost-crack", and 13 metres long. Much of the wood was hand-sawn then hewed into shape with axes, just as the beams were in the C13th.

The great organ – built in the 18th Century – was unaffected by either heat or water on the night of the fire. What did for it was the accumulation of a yellow dust - lead monoxide - in its pipes.

The whole structure – 12 metres high, six keyboards, 7,952 pipes, 19 wind-chests – was disassembled and taken to workshops outside Paris. After reinstallation the instrument was re-tuned – a task which takes several months as each pipe is minutely altered.

On 7th December, the Archbishop of Paris's first words on entering the reclaimed cathedral will be: "Awake oh organ, Let God's praise be heard!"

The eight bells of the north tower were also removed in 2023 – a massive operation given their size. They were cleaned and treated, and then returned a few weeks ago. The biggest of the bells is called Emmanuel, which means, God with us. We sang of Emmanuel in our opening hymn this morning, for whom we long as the season of Advent begins, leading us towards Christmas and the celebration of His birth.

Watching the aftermath of the terrible fire in 2019, the firemen and clergy and volunteers gingerly went through the still smoking building, eyes fixed on where the floor had been, now covered with blackened timber, molten lead from the roof and so much more detritus. Almost bent double, heads down, they scoured what was beneath their feet for anything valuable, anything that might be salvaged and saved and put into the restoration of the building.

When the building reopened for President Macron and others yesterday, the heads were not down. Everyone gazed upwards.

Look up...raise your heads. Says Jesus.

It was as if out of the parable of the apocalypse of the 2019 conflagration that had engulfed the cathedral, a Phoenix of faith, carved in stone and wood, metal and glass, the work of many hands and minds, called to mind the words of Jesus. Out of the flame and catastrophe and disaster and perplexity and fear and foreboding, Jesus from the heart of the storm called out: "Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Look up...raise your heads. Says Jesus.

I know for many people in our congregation today, members and visitors alike, this has been a tough old year. For so many different reasons. It's not been a complete vale of tears, there has been laughter and fun and quiet pride and a sense of achievement. But other moments have

loomed large. So many bereavements in recent months have left holes in the fabric of our family of faith here. Maybe this year's Blue Christmas service on the afternoon of the 15th will help some who have gone through dark times.

Look up...raise your heads. Says Jesus.

Looking at the news in recent weeks. Catastrophic floods. The election result in the United States, but more importantly, what goes with it for the wider world. The rise of far-right parties in just about every country in Europe and all that means for the fabric of our communities and countries. The heightened tension between Ukraine and Russia where longer and longer ranged missiles are deployed. Gaza. Lebanon. Sudan and South Sudan. Yemen. Spiralling cost of living. Energy price hikes. Where is it all going? When is it going to end?

Look up...raise your heads. Says Jesus.

Our Church of Scotland coming to terms with reduced means, human and financial, yet still trying to meet the same, and growing needs in our communities where there is so much hurt, hidden and in the open. Should we unite? What will our future be? Are we simply managing decline?

Look up...raise your heads. Says Jesus.

And the city council still hasn't fully re-opened the Braid Road! Look up...raise your heads. Says Jesus. Even unto Buckstone and Fairmilehead.

In this little apocalypse in Luke's Gospel, where Jesus draws attention to frightening images, confusing metaphors, shocking admonition, nightmare scenarii, from heights and depths, from floods and famines, from fire and storm, through it all, because of it all, despite it all, the voice of Jesus says: Look up...raise your heads. Says Jesus.

Out of all of this misery and doom, we are told to look up and raise our heads. The gospel writer Luke wrote with a deep and growing sense that Christian living in his time, and in ours, is a kind

of *living in between, living through* the times. Waiting for Jesus, longing for Jesus, and coming to know and believe I and work alongside this Jesus for Whom we wait in the middle of an eventful, unpredictable, even tumultuous world. We may not always know where He is, but we wait, and wonder, and look up...and raise our heads.

Faithful, active waiting in the *meantime* because we have put our trust faithfully, foolishly, hopefully in the One Who holds us in the *ending* time.

Vincent Van Gogh captures something of this harrowing/hopeful Advent text in one of his most famous paintings, *The Starry Night*. It's painted in the bold colours he is known for. Van Gogh was the son of a Dutch pastor, and was himself an evangelist to the poor for a while. The painting depicts an apocalyptic sky like the one Jesus talked about. Swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep, dark blue and black. There is a bright yellow moon, and even brighter stars. In the foreground there is a cypress tree, in Van Gogh's time it was associated with graveyards and mourning. Beyond it a small town huddled in darkness, but at the heart of the town a Church, with its steeple the most prominent feature. Pointing...upwards...to the dark skies...to the bright stars...to those glimpses of God we catch from time to time.

The neo-Gothic arches in our church, running down the aisles, framing the great east Burne-Jones window, were also designed to draw our eyes...upwards. With our soaring prayers. With the soaring introit, O radiant dawn.

O Radiant Dawn, Splendour of eternal Light, Sun of Justice:

Come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death...

The people who walked in darkness have seen the great light

Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.

Look up...raise your heads. Says Jesus.

A young person has joined our church family today. Our choir has sung beautifully. The short reading from Luke starts with an apocalypse, but not a final end time, rather an uncovering, a disclosure, an insight, a revelation, a vision of light, and of hope.

The first candle of our Advent Crown is for hope. It's tiny, feeble little light is for hope. Calling us out of darkness and fear and grief and pain and frustration and despair, into light, and into hope.

Oh, we have to work for it, and the working will be easy and hard, fruitful and unrewarding. But it draws us, and gathers us, and encourages us, and blesses us. May it do so...for you.

This Advent, look up...raise your heads. Says Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen