

*Bishop Ross Bay recorded a sermon for use in online worship on Advent Sunday 2021. The gospel passage was Luke 21:25-36, and the text of the sermon follows.*

I was interested to hear last week that Cambridge Dictionary has announced its Word of the Year for 2021. It's a word that has been looked up globally online 243,000 times this year, having not previously figured in any noticeable way. The word spiked earlier in the year when the NASA craft that bears this name made its descent to Mars in February.

The word is perseverance. The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as "continued effort to do or achieve something, even when this is difficult or takes a long time." The team at Cambridge think that the word perfectly captures the undaunted will of people across the world to never give up, despite the many challenges of 2021. Cambridge Dictionary is the top website in the world for learners of English, and they say that perseverance is not a common word for students of English to have in their vocabulary.

I think that perseverance is a perfect Advent word, a word that should very much be part of the vocabulary of Christian believers, and maybe in this year more than any other. When I was feeling a bit overwhelmed by work back in July, I jokingly said "I could do with a week in Level 4 right now just to make everything stop so I can catch my breath." A few weeks later I got more than any of us could have imagined or ever wanted, and most of 4 months on, at least in Auckland, we are sitting hopefully on the edge of some easing restrictions that will allow activity to begin to return to workplaces and communities, and of course to our churches.

Perseverance has been a virtue much in demand for people. It is a virtue that has been a mark of the people of God from the beginning. We might think of the family in the ark waiting for the floods to recede; of Abram and Sarai as they longed to see the promise of a child come to pass; of the Hebrew people travelling to the Promised Land; of Exiles in Babylon waiting for their return to Jerusalem; of the many years with the absence of prophecy and the expectation of a Messiah; of the establishment of Christian faith in an Empire hostile to it.

Jesus warned and encouraged people that their faith would need to be worked out in situations of great challenge and even mortal danger. We have read today from part of his teaching in the Temple in the days leading up to his arrest. His words to the disciples take on this increasing focus about things to come, things they must prepare for, about maintaining hope in the coming kingdom of God. This is the final verse we heard: "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

That's a statement about perseverance, and in it I see two things for those who seek to find themselves standing at the coming of the Son of Man. One is discernment and the other is prayer.

The whole of this short passage is wrapped around signs for which people must be alert. Jesus urges people to pay attention to what goes on in the world around them and to discern the activity of God within it. The parable of the fig tree reminds them that this kind of discerning interpretation is not foreign to them, and that they must learn to develop a spiritual discernment which can help them to identify, point to, and join with the activity of God.

But as this won't always be an easy thing to do. Followers of Jesus will also need to draw on the strength of God through prayer. Both these things are works of prayer, I believe, for they are works and gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who enables us to understand God's work, and it is the Spirit who gives us the strength to undertake it with God.

What are we seeing now, and for what do we need strength, that we might persevere and stand with Christ and before Christ in the work of the kingdom?

As we move into this new COVID-19 Protection Framework, the traffic light system, vaccination certificates are the key issue. They will unlock the opportunity for people to take part in a lot of community activities. In a lot of cases they will determine whether people can keep their jobs.

As an organisation that gathers groups of people together for worship and activities, the Church is subject to this as well. We are having to find ways to work within the new framework and all of the requirements and restrictions that it places on us as we go about our work. We are a community that puts a high value on hospitality and welcome, and tries to offer a place to belong for people no matter what their circumstances. It will be hard for us to tell people that they cannot come to gatherings that require certificates, especially for corporate worship.

As you will know I have been an encourager of vaccinations as an important mechanism in building the health resilience of the community to manage and ultimately overcome the impact of this virus. The population is reaching a strong overall vaccination level. For a variety of reasons some people are choosing not to be vaccinated, and some people are not able to be.

We are constantly asking ourselves what it means to show love for one another, love for our neighbour, and within this health environment we believe that vaccination is a tool for that.

But in the community in general there is a great risk that the unvaccinated population will be judged and blamed for their decision, not just unable to fully participate in many activities, but spurned for their decision.

That is not who we are.

We must work at what it means to show love for all people and how we will offer ministry to all through this time. We are having to make some necessary decisions about how to manage church life while not losing sight of the fact that God's love is for the whole world and for all people. We must be driven by love and not by fear.

A friend of mine recently sent me this quote from Bishop Steve Charleston, a retired bishop in the USA. He wrote:

"We are still fighting the pandemic. I am not talking about the medical one, but the other one, the psychological one: fear and anger. The two go hand in hand. As fear continues to chase people into corners, fracturing community and obscuring reality, people become more

frustrated and angry. Against this condition there is no vaccine other than faith. We must be motivated by something stronger than what makes us afraid. We must act out of a greater purpose than anger. Faith is the antidote and every faith community the clinic. Pray strength to all those seeking to replace fear with love and anger with compassion.”

As we persevere through this pandemic, we are discerning what is best to do as we play our part in a health response. As we do so, may we not lose sight of the work of God and the presence of the kingdom, and persevere through all that is challenging us about how we continue to be the Body of Christ in this time. How do we reach out to all with the love of God?

May the Spirit grant us the gift of discerning wisdom as we read the signs of our time, the gift of strength to persevere through all that is challenging, that we may stand as the people of God before the Son of Man.