No Divine Rescue
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Year A, Ordinary 32
Amos 5:18-24, Matthew 25: 1-13
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When writing this sermon earlier this week I found myself writing slightly different introductions that I could use depending on the outcome of yesterday's general election. And then I remembered that under MMP it will probably be several weeks before we really know the results and just where we might be heading as a country. Frankly after weeks of campaigning it's a small relief that we are now moving into the period of negotiation to form our next government and we can move on from some of the very negative campaign tactics deployed over the last few weeks. But let's not be too hasty, because there are some lessons to be learned.

Critique of members of different political parties is part of the electoral process. The ideas being put forward deserve debate, and should be tested by those with differing perspectives. Sadly, this election cycle was particularly bad when it came to personally attacking individuals with little to no reference to the policies those people were promoting. Worse still, the victims of these bullying tactics were almost exclusively women.

My deep concern about this style of politics is that more people in our community seem to think it is ok to dehumanise those they disagree with. But it went even further than that. Some candidates were in fact demonised. Demonisation is the process where a person is portrayed as evil, dangerous or subhuman in order to justify hostility against them. It works by stripping away complexity and nuance, reducing other people to a simple threat that must be opposed or eliminated.

Such processes are common in American election campaigns, but have been something that New Zealand politicians historically avoided. Because politics should be civilised. The personal attacks that we have seen in the last few elections in this country, mark a movement away from a good democratic tradition towards one that is much more hostile.

My deeper concern is that if we are importing this style of politics from other places in the world, what other thinking and ideologies are coming with it that we might be less aware of?

There are a number of theological ideas that Donald Trump has intentionally exploited in his political campaigns including this last week's US midterm elections. I am speaking specifically of apocalyptic theology; the theology that imagines the end times where the world as we know it is replaced by a new peaceful creation. But first apocalyptic theology imagines total destruction of this world. In its own way it demonises our environment and supports the politics of those who wish to continue exploiting our resources and ignore the reality of the climate crisis. Beliefs that emphasise a better world to come, have the consequence of devaluing the world we have. Sadly, this sort of thinking is beginning to creep into our politics as well, but not to the same extent, largely because these ideas which are very popular in American evangelical churches are not as widely known in Aotearoa.

A few years ago I ran a study session for a church titled debunking the rapture. And it went horribly because no one in that church had any idea of what the rapture was. The rapture is the idea that when the end times come, all the most faithful Christians will be swept away into heaven while the rest of humanity is left to clean up the mess. This morning's readings are some of the source material that the concept of the Rapture is based upon.

As far as theological concepts go, the Rapture is a recent development first being articulated in the early 19th Century. It began primarily with the teaching of John Nelson Darby, the founder of the exclusive brethren. Darby, drawing upon a number of biblical texts, came to believe that he had discovered a blueprint for the end of human history. By combining the references to the righteous who will be saved from the book of Revelation, with ideas such as people being swept up into the air, Darby promoted the idea that faithful Christians will be swept into heaven prior to God raining down wrathful judgement on those left behind. So in a nutshell, the Rapture refers to a future event where good people of faith will be raptured into paradise, while the rest of the humanity will be left to face the catastrophic events that will end the world.

These ideas have been popularised in many ways often by faithful Christians who truly believe that these events as Darby described them are about to unfold. In fact there is a multimillion dollar industry that has grown up around the promotion of such beliefs. The Rapture is big business. But the popularisation of the Rapture has also happened through secular media.

For example, there was a television series called *The Leftovers.* As the title suggests it is a story about the people still living in the world after the mysterious disappearance of around 2% of the population. When asked about his beliefs regarding the Rapture, one of the key creative people responsible for creating *The Leftovers* had the following to say:

"…my belief is that The Rapture itself is so ill-defined in the texts upon which it's supposedly based … even amongst evangelical communities, there's a tremendous amount of debate as to whether it's figurative or literal…"[1]

That's an interesting statement because many of his points regarding the concept of the rapture are true. But the point he doesn't touch on, which for us is the most important thing to consider, is how a theology like the Rapture or any aspect of beliefs about the world ending, fit within the rest of our belief?

The idea that God is the final judge who will descend on a chaotic earth in order to establish a new world is not unlike the portrayal of Gods in ancient Greek plays. When Greek playwrights reached a point in their story where they could no longer resolve things in a logical or meaningful way, they would employ the use of a God who would appear floating above the other characters. This effect was achieved through suspending an actor from a crane. This is where we gain the expression, Deus ex machina, literally God out of the machine. Playwrights employed the use of a God to resolve the difficulties in their otherwise unresolvable story. In terms of writing a satisfying conclusion to a story, it's basically a cheat.

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[1] http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/24/from-lost-to-the-rapture-creators-damon-lindelof-and-tom-perrotta-on-hbo-s-the-leftovers.html

What the concept of the Rapture suggests is that there is still a desire within the parts of the Christian community to simply have God appear and sort out the mess that our world has become. Unfortunately this desire for divine rescue is not an appeal to the God we proclaim here in our worship every Sunday. The avenging God of the Rapture bears no resemblance to the God who created this world out of love and cherishes all that is within it.

In Rapture theology Christ is often presented as an avenging menace who pours out misery on the earth. That is a far cry from the non-violent ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the one we call the prince of peace.

And worse still, Rapture theology assumes that the salvation of the earth can only come through a cataclysmic event brought on by God where billions of people will suffer. This is a far cry from the Kingdom of God as described by Jesus in the Gospels.

When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, he was not talking about God providing pie in the sky when we die. Nor did Jesus suggest that the Kingdom of God could only be found through divine action at the end of time. Jesus' message was about discovering the good that is already here in this world. The Kingdom of God is here and now and can be glimpsed, felt and experienced in a myriad of ways. The Kingdom of God as described in this way focuses our attentions on the needs of today and affirms the basic sanctity of our everyday lives. The challenge is to put our energy and attention into that, rather than placing the responsibility for justice, love and mercy solely into God's hands. Those gifts have been given to us by God, and it is up to us to use them to support all the goodness already present in our world. Amen.