

Sunday 18th November 2018
2 before Advent (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Daniel 12.1-3

NT: Hebrews 10.11-14[15-18]19-25

G: Mark 13.1-8

After a Gospel reading such as that, it would be tempting to preach on certain current topics. “Beware that no one leads you astray;” “When you hear of wars... this must take place; “Nation will rise against nation...” All very alarming, and therefore an easy segue into the events going on around us. Except that I was a bit concerned that, in this fast-moving world of politics and news media, in the gap between writing the sermon and this morning things might have changed so radically that it would seem irrelevant. Now that even the Daily Mail has become the voice of moderation, I’m not sure I understand the world around us. But there is more in the news than that, because it is difficult to hear today’s Gospel about earthquakes and famines and the like without also being reminded of the wildfires in a Californian town last week, with hundred of fatalities, and hundreds still missing. These are challenging times, and yet in a week when we have recalled the end of the First World War, I wonder whether the end-time seemed even closer to those who heard this Gospel reading during the 1914-18 war.

Our reading today is known as the ‘Little Apocalypse,’ and is incidentally used as one of the markers used to date the writing of the Gospel of Mark. There are external sources which indicate that the Temple in Jerusalem was still under construction in AD62, so the disciples’ wonder at the size of the stones and buildings seems to resonate with that. In addition, there is further resonance from the references to earthquakes, as there were a number of earthquakes throughout Italy in the 60s, and if, as many think, the Gospel was written for a

primarily Roman audience, the earthquake in Pompeii in 62, or the many earthquakes across Italy in 68, may be relevant.

All of which is mildly interesting if you are trying to construct a history of the text, but we are also given a glimpse of Mark's theological understanding. In modern Judaism there has been a renaissance of understanding of 'the Land' not just as a place where one can live in safety, and as a particular defined place which is associated with the area promised to Abraham and supposedly colonized by David – if he existed – in the 10th Century BC, but also 'the Land' represents a theological understanding of the Jewish covenant with God. Place, promise and identity are all caught up in this. The main newspaper in Israel is called Ha'Aretz (in Hebrew, 'the Land') and so even the print media characterizes Israeli identity rather more than the Daily Mail does in this country. But in the Gospel of Mark, written at a time when Jews inhabited this territory, but no longer had governmental control of it, the author uses the Temple to characterize the enduring covenant between God and his people. This, then, becomes interesting. Look, the disciples say, at the magnificence of the Temple. Look at this statement of the magnificence of God and the covenant of trust in him which has risen up before us. Yes, says Jesus, but even these stones will be thrown down. What will you trust in then? Where is the sign that God's promised salvation is still on offer?

This question is at the root of today's Gospel passage. When everything around you is collapsing, what are you meant to do? And Jesus' answer is quite clear: "Beware that no one leads you astray." He goes on to say, "Do not be alarmed." In other words, when it is all going wrong, just hold steady. Today's readings expand on this further. Our second reading was from the Letter to the Hebrews, probably written at exactly the same time as the Gospel of Mark, reflecting a very Jewish perspective on the period immediately before

the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD70. The unknown author of the letter speaks of the covenant with God not in terms of The Land, or even The Temple (although he uses the language of the Temple as he speaks of priests at services, and he speaks of entering the sanctuary), but he says this: "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds." The writer was very much wedded to Temple theology, but he also understood that the teachings of Jesus had to have a broader significance to those who would never see the Temple, either because of location, or because of the author's prescience that within a few years the Temple would have been destroyed. The covenant with God is not only expressed in buildings, but it is expressed in our behaviour as people of God. When the buildings which we have constructed – not constructed by God – are tumbling down around us, then where do we put our faith? The answer is clear: do not be led astray; do not be alarmed. And in the sentences which follow the passage which we were given to read out today, Jesus goes further as he tells the disciples that despite all of these things going on, they are called to continue in their task, which is to preach the Gospel, to stand firm, and to watch (vv 10-13).

A century ago, our ancestors were caught up in a horror which was every bit as big as anything described in today's readings, or anything which the historical record has preserved as happening as the Romans overran Jerusalem in AD70 and destroyed the Temple. The First World War tested the faith of a nation, but it also found people who were looking for faith. It was an eye-opener for the Church of England, as Chaplains went to the front line and found not just suffering on a scale they had not seen before, but also encountered men who had had no contact with the Church at all. They thought that the British army had a foundation in Christianity (alongside those combatants of other faiths from across the

world), but they found men who had never heard the Lord's Prayer. The War devastated the nation, but it was a shock to the Church in different ways. Geoffrey Suddart-Kennedy, the most famous First World War Chaplain, wrote in his poem *The Suffering God*:

*Yet men are dying, dying soul and body,
Cursing the God who gave to them their birth,
Sick of the world with all its sham and shoddy,
Sick of the lies that darken all the earth.*

And this summed it up. They did not want God. And what was Studdert-Kennedy's response? It was to continue in his task, which was to preach the Gospel, to stand firm, and to watch.

There is not one of us who has not faced difficult times, and there is not one of us who has not turned our back on God and thought that there must be something easier or better, or at the very least that God has not provided much help. And this is Jesus' description of this state. Things get bad... and then even worse. And what should we do? Well, he says, stand firm, and watch. The covenant with God is not about buildings or land, and so our side of it should not be about waiting for something to happen, but rather about watching and waiting, about praying and holding steady.

And perhaps I have been talking about Brexit all along, though perhaps not about the Daily Mail. But our readings are not about Brexit: they are about the Great War, and they are about catastrophic infernos, and they are about when everything around leaves us in a state of desperation. And Jesus says that we need to keep watching and waiting and praying, because we cannot be swayed by what is happening around us. We need to hold firm to

something else. So, let us preach the Gospel, stand firm, and watch. In difficult times, either in our own lives, or in the world around us, we cannot always expect the religion we are taught to explain or make sense of it all. But this is too great a hope. All Jesus requires of us is that we watch and pray. And that is what we do in every Eucharist. Let us watch and pray, because we do not know what is around the corner. Let us watch and pray, because we know that there is something more secure than the edifices which we construct for ourselves.

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