

Second Sunday before Advent

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew in Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 18 November 2018.

Readings: Hebrews 10 vv 11-14 & 19-25 and Mark 13 vv 1-8

We live in strange and turbulent times. Hearing again Jesus' words in St Mark's gospel, we can all too easily look at what Jesus says about the signs of the end times, and run a mental tick list against them.

Being led astray. Charlatans claim to be able to offer cures to those who are desperate: 'Do this and ...' Clever fraudsters and convincing criminals conduct convincing manipulation over the internet or the telephone. We have had to face up to appalling accounts of abuse and manipulation by those who use spiritual power to their own end.

Last week, we remembered the centenary of the end of the Great War, and the millions who died in that conflict. And the Second World War. And all the conflicts since then. And we cannot close our eyes or shut our ears to the pain of those who still live in the middle of war and conflict, cruelty and persecution, discrimination and slavery.

There are, as there always have been, earthquakes and famines. We have seen the pictures of utter devastation in California after the forest fires that have destroyed whole communities and left many dead. Even the most powerful and sophisticated nation in the world can do nothing in the face of raging fires.

And then there is Brexit. We will have different views on whether or not leaving the European Union is the right course of action for the United Kingdom. But it is hard not to be alarmed at the political turmoil that is such a distraction from all the other tasks facing the UK Government.

So the current state of the world seems to be uncomfortably close to the picture of chaos that Jesus offers. But, of course, this has always been the case. The same could be said in every generation throughout history.

Pictures of judgement do not make comfortable reading. But we cannot ignore these uncomfortable pictures, as they form an authentic part of the Bible's whole message. In our reading today, Mark reinforces a persistent message that has run throughout his Gospel. Firstly, the path of discipleship involves suffering. Secondly, those who follow this path of discipleship faithfully will be vindicated. The destruction of the temple is a symbol of the bankruptcy of everything the temple stood for. The temple had become an expression of the deeply damaged relationship between God and his people. It is as if somebody who predicted that the Houses of Parliament were to be completely destroyed was saying something about the whole institution and what it represents, rather than just the bricks and mortar.

Jesus' coming brings the possibility of a new and transforming relationship between God and humanity, and Jesus' resurrection is a significant turning point in the battle between good and evil. But the battle between good and evil goes on until the end of the world and Jesus' second coming. The various calamities that Jesus mentions are not to be ticked off like omens. Rather, they are symptoms of an ongoing struggle between good and evil. And we are called and invited to shine the light of God's love and compassion into the darkness of human sin and greed, manipulation and abuse; into human suffering; to challenge all that diminishes our humanity.

We are in it for the long haul. Jesus cautions against over-enthusiasm; calm preparedness is preferable to hasty action. 'Do not be alarmed.' The problems we see around us, the consequences of evil, are 'but the beginning of the birth pangs.' So our task is to be alert, to line ourselves up with Jesus and all that is good, even if that is not always comfortable, and to remember that, one day, we will all have to account for the effect of our decisions in the present.

God cares about you and me in the midst of joy and pain. When we bring our whole selves to God in prayer and with faithfulness of life, we can become transformed. The message of the writer to the Hebrews is that God is no longer seen as a shopkeeper who should hand over the goods when we believe we have paid our price. Nor is God a magical being who grants wishes based on whimsy if we are on God's good side that day. Instead, God becomes a constant and faithful companion on the journey, and this relationship bears witness to both who we are in each moment and who we are becoming.

This relationship was vital in the time when St Mark's gospel was written. There are other prophetic figures going around predicting a variety of apocalyptic events that must happen in order for God to create a clean slate and establish a new creation. Jesus' concept of prophecy is different. It is not something that predicts the future in forensic detail. It's not a tick list. Instead Jesus uses prophecy to hasten repentance and reform. Therefore, the relationship that the disciples have with Jesus helps them discern what is true and what is false. When one does not heed a prophet, destruction is one of the consequences.

In the midst of chaos and swirling rumors of destruction, Jesus tells the disciples not to engage in the apocalyptic zeal going on around them. This speaks to us as followers of Jesus even now. As Christians, we have one charge, and that is to be faithful and to share the Gospel with others by what we do as much as what we say. Like Jesus, we have both opportunity and a mission to be with others. Instead of getting drawn into a mob mentality, instead of blindly following others and being affected by their hysteria, we can focus on what is right in front of us and show others how our transformational relationship with God gives us strength and hope in uncertain times.

The message of the letter to the Hebrews is clear: our faith in God and faithfulness to each other saves us from destruction. This is the Good News, indeed! Amen.