

Sermon - Birth pangs

Based on: Daniel 12.1–3; Hebrews 10.11–14, 19–25; Mark 13.1–11

Daniel

- Apocalyptic books like the book of Daniel, and apocalyptic discourses like that of Jesus in today's Gospel reading, provide both warning and reassurance for people of every age - people in the past, people now, and people in the future.
- I remind you that prophetic writings are not supposed to be predictions of fact.
- Rather, they are the word of God addressing a particular situation or concern.
- Prophecies are indications of how events and people are understood to affect each other - not from a human perspective, but from a divine perspective.
- In the reading from Daniel, the reference to Michael concerns the archangel Michael - a spiritual servant of God who functions as a warrior angel.
- The passage from Daniel is about understanding how God looks after even the dead, and holds all to account.
- It is a reassurance to those who stay firm in their faith relationship with God, that even beyond death God will nevertheless bring them into fullness of life with him.
- It further encourages the faithful to be wise - to actively grow in wisdom and act upon that - and also to lead others to right-wiseness.
- That means showing others how to be in right alignment with God, and encouraging them to practice bringing themselves back into that right-wise alignment.

The end of the world

- So as we look at the Gospel reading, we see Jesus responding to the disciples - first as they express admiration for the construction of the temple, and then as they ask questions about the disturbing future Jesus alludes to.
- And, like Daniel, Jesus provides a message of warning and reassurance.
- Even the wonderful building of the temple, with huge blocks of stone, is not to be depended upon.
- It, too, is vulnerable to destruction.
- Indeed, the world as we know it, will come to an end.
- This becomes true time and time again for many people - both as individuals and as communities.
- For the first disciples, their world seemed to come to an end when Jesus died.
- Their direct experience of his death, then resurrection, then the outpouring of God's Spirit, changed their personal world dramatically.
- They then found themselves continuing the teaching and ministry of Jesus, and in turn being tried before Jewish councils and beaten in synagogues, and eventually being persecuted and driven out of Jerusalem and out of the Jewish community of faith.
- In due course even the temple would be torn down by the Roman commander Vespasian in 70AD, in response to the Jewish revolt against the Roman occupation.
- For those in Jerusalem at the time, it was the end of the world - the end of the world as they knew it to be.

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'I am he!'

- And, so often in those circumstances, there are people who step up and claim to have the answer, to have a solution.
- 'Follow my way', they might say, 'Do what I say, and that will see you through.'
- They might claim to have been given a divine message, or use words of Scripture to support their message.
- Jesus warns us: 'Don't be led astray from the true path - my way of sacrificial love.'

- I am reminded of someone I'm providing pastoral care for.
- They have stepped away from an abusive marriage after many years of trying to accommodate their spouse's demands and unsustainable lifestyle, and in doing so, their world has come to an end.
- While I am providing that person with pastoral support, I remind both them - and myself - that I am not a qualified counsellor.
- I often point them towards an appropriate professional, which they do intend to go to, once their transitional situation stabilises.
- Not everyone is careful to warn others that their advice needs to be tested, and that wise discernment needs to be regularly applied.

The end - of what?

- Let's look further at Jesus' reference to '*the end [that] is still to come*' - understood to be the end of the world, or more helpfully, the end of the world as anyone might know it to be.
- When people and communities are anxious about events that destabilise what they have been counting on, then anything unexpected or out of the ordinary can be interpreted as a sign that the end is near.
- An earthquake in a usually stable zone, a disruptive volcanic eruption, a major terrorist attack where there hasn't been one before, the outbreak of war somewhere in the world - people often feel that these are portents of something bigger and more ominous.
- Jesus acknowledges these concerns, and such apparent signs, and yet reassures us: '*do not be alarmed.*'
- And then he says something curious, but which is key to the whole passage:
This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. (Mark 13.8)
- Jesus talks about the end, and it's easy to assume that he means the end of the world literally rather than metaphorically - however we understand that to be.
- But the end is metaphorically like the end of a pregnancy.
- All the time in the build up to the 'end', something has been developing and growing out of sight, and now that time of development is coming to an end in quite a dramatic way.
- The disruptive events and the concerning portents are an indication of labour pains, as something new comes into being.

A birth

- What is this new thing?
- We need to remember that Jesus was talking specifically to his followers, and with Mark including these words in his Gospel account, they are meant for all followers of Jesus to refer to whenever needed, from generation to generation.
- The new thing that Jesus is referring to is mentioned in the next paragraph.
- He introduces the idea of his followers being personally impacted - being subjected to trials and beatings and being confronted by those in power.

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- This is not random abuse, but specifically, as Jesus says, *'because of me'* - as a consequence of acting out our faith in Christ, and thus continuing his ministry in the world.
- The followers of Jesus, named as disciples then and called Christians now, are expected to stand up to those in authority as a witness - a testimony of everything that Jesus preached, everything that Jesus did, everything that Jesus embodied.
- And it is here that Jesus presents the great commission in Mark's account, which is that *'the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.'* (Mark 13.10)
- - the good news of Jesus Christ bringing about the kingdom of God, through the forgiveness of sins, the righting of injustices, the addressing of inequalities, the extending of God's welcome and hospitality and peace to all, without discrimination, or distinction, or prejudice.
- Fundamentally, what Jesus is talking about in this passage, is that when our world seems to be coming to an end because everything that we counted on as being rock-solid and stable is now being shaken and disrupted, that these are the labour pains of being able to manifest God's kingdom on earth in a new way.
- Instead of being anxious, instead we can have faith in God, just as God has faith in us, to participate with him in helping to bring about his kingdom.
- For Christians, an apparent crisis can be seen, through God's eyes, as an opportunity for another part of God's kingdom to come into being.
- Of course any crisis that we experience is usually unpleasant: it is distressing and upsetting, and can be painful - sometimes physically, but usually psychologically.
- Nevertheless, Jesus encourages us to view these unpleasant experiences as if they were like 'birth pangs' - the labour pains of something that will be transforming and ultimately a blessing.

Have confidence

- And the writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us to have confidence in Jesus, and in our faith relationship with God through Jesus.
- So I will end by repeating the second part of that reading, as an encouragement to stay committed to Jesus, as he remains committed to us:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10.19-25)