

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 14 NOVEMBER 2021

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This material was prepared for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation (on Zoom – but not for much longer), and for face-to-face worship at Brighton-le-Sands. As we near the end of the ecclesiastical year and Lectionary Year B, the Lectionary continues with Mark, this week taking us to “the little apocalypse”. I hope the reflection on that passage is helpful to you.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

O God our maker,
We worship you as Creator, the One from whom all that is has its being.
You are outside the confines of time and place,
ever-being, eternal, omnipotent and omniscient.
We praise you for the rhythm of the seasons as we enjoy this time of spring,
when the chills of winter dissipate
and new life bursts into being with the warmth of the sun.
We praise you for the summer, with its long and languid days,
its warmth and its invitation to outdoor activities and enjoyment.
We praise you for the autumn,
as days shorten and temperatures cool
and nature spectacularly prepares for another winter.
And we praise you for that coldest of seasons,
mercifully mild in our part of the world,
but necessary for the cycle of new life to be fulfilled.
We praise you that there is such order yet such creativity
in the rhythms that regulate our world,
that you have given us such a splendid and bountiful home.
How easily we overlook your extraordinary gifts and blessings!
God our Father, we worship you and love you.

For indeed when, in our minds, we stand before you,
when we approach you in prayer,
we know that we are not worthy of your love and grace.
As your light casts shadows,
we creep into their darkness,
for we are sinful, and our thoughts and deeds are evil.
Our resolutions are ephemeral,
our promises worthless.
We continue in our sins.
We have not loved you,
nor have we loved our neighbour.
We have sinned both by acts of commission,
and by acts of omission.
Father, we are ashamed,
and ask for your mercy,
that you will forgive us,
and strengthen us to be more worthy of your love.
Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness.**

The writer of John's gospel gives us Jesus' words of assurance:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.
Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

We are assured, then, that in the risen Jesus Christ,
our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**

Mark 13:1-13

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

(Covid has so preoccupied us for almost two years now that it has almost blinded us to the many other endemic problems facing the world. Not that Covid has gone away for most of the non-Western world, but for too many nations it is a lesser crisis compared to the other challenges that face their populations every day. So this week's prayers are for a wider gambit of the problems facing the world.)²

God our Father,

We have been selfish and neglectful in our prayers, distracted by the pandemic,

Our own crisis has preoccupied us,

and we have turned a blind eye to the many problems faced by other peoples.

So today we come to you to pray for what we have been overlooking,

and to ask your mercy on those who suffer from things

that make Covid, for them, a minor distraction.

Father, we pray first for those who find themselves in areas of conflict.

There are so many conflicts scattered around the world,

some of them seemingly inexorable.

We pray for the work of the peacemakers;

we pray that hard hearts might be softened by the suffering that is inflicted;

we pray that compromise and accommodation been seen as strengths,

and not weaknesses.

But most of all we pray for an end to the needless suffering,

not only of the combatants, but of civilians, of children, of the very old.

We pray too for the millions of refugees across the world,

fleeing conflict, fleeing oppression and injustice, simply fleeing poverty.

Move the wealthy nations of the world to compassion,

that funds may be found to meet immediate needs,

and homes may be found to give new beginnings and new hope.

May the root causes of such despair find solutions;

may the world shoulder its responsibilities to all humanity,

especially to the most vulnerable and the most needy.

We pray also for those who are afflicted by hunger,

those for whom there is no food security –

through drought, or desertification, or warfare, or corruption and injustice.

Again, may the world realise its responsibilities to all peoples,

and accept that there is no reason why anyone should go hungry

in a world that is so profligate and so wasteful with food.

We pray for nations under oppressive governments.
Father, we must not succumb to the arrogance of thinking
that our own models of government are the only valid ones;
but we do pray for an end to governments
that deprive their people of their human rights,
that corruptly misuse the nation's resources and inflict poverty on their citizens,
that are beholden to ideologies that blind them to decency and common sense.
We pray too for nations that labour under the burden of diseases,
not just Covid-19 that has so captured our attention,
but other endemic diseases like malaria, Ebola, Aids and tuberculosis.
The West has such medical resources,
but pharmaceutical companies are more interested in profitable markets
than those that are most in need of their research and their products.
Finally Father we pray for the natural systems of our planet.
Despite the self-congratulation and backslapping,
the Glasgow conference seems to have squandered humanity's last best chance
of addressing climate change with the urgency that it demands.
We face a bleak future,
despite the vast grass roots movements demanding change.
May we yet find solutions;
may each of us play our part and more in bringing about needed changes;
and may we find ways to move our politicians to real and courageous action.
Father, there are so many problems facing the world.
They humble us and remind us of our utter dependence on you.
We do not do well when we cease to walk humbly as your people.
So we pray once again, "Your Kingdom come".

And now Father we conclude with the prayer that Jesus gave us,

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

6 **Blessing and Dismissal**

Go now, and hold firm to your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,
for he alone is worthy of your trust and confidence,
and remember always that those who endure to the end will be saved.
The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you now,
and abide with you evermore.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

One morning in April 2019, those of us who live on this side of the world awoke to the shocking news that Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was burning. The fire broke out in the evening, Paris time, and crowds of Parisians congregated on the Île de la Cité to watch the conflagration in shocked dismay. Worldwide no less than in France and Paris itself, millions who would not normally give much of a thought to *any* church grieved the potential loss of this great icon of Paris. Since its completion in the thirteenth century, Notre Dame had stood as a symbol of the greatness and magnificence of Paris. The fire that engulfed so much of the building, leaving it dangerously impaired and threatened with complete collapse, had been unthinkable only days before. What had been brought to the precipice of disaster was no mere building, but an embodiment of national pride and character.

No less shocking, then, were Jesus' words recorded in Mark 13, known as the "little apocalypse". Apparently full of national pride, and directing attention to the great Temple of Jerusalem, one of the disciples exclaims to Jesus, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" The building that they gazed down upon certainly warranted that description. When the Jews had returned from Babylon to reclaim their land of Judah, they had set about rebuilding Jerusalem and its Temple. This "second Temple" was apparently a pretty humble affair. King Herod the Great, however, who ruled Judea under Roman authority in the second half of the first century BC, and who was a great builder, constructed a magnificent new Temple. To create a level platform for the structure, massive retaining walls were constructed, and giant support pillars installed, to carry the weight of the huge building. The stones used in the construction – as the disciple observed – were massive. Although the project was still not entirely complete in Jesus' day, the Temple was already regarded as one of the great wonders of the world. Like Notre Dame, it was a focus of national pride and national character for the Jewish people. *Unlike* Notre Dame, it was genuinely at the very heart of day to day life for the Jews.

So the thought that this massive triumph of engineering might be destroyed was truly shocking. Historically, of course, that is exactly what did happen. At the end of the Jewish War that was waged from AD 66 until 70, the conquering Roman general, Titus, captured Jerusalem and ordered that the Temple be completely destroyed. The so-called "Western Wall", where today devout Jews still go to pray, was no more than one of the retaining walls that supported the temple platform. Titus left it to denote the wonder of the building that he had destroyed. The writer of Mark's gospel was writing *around* AD 70, but whether the Temple's destruction had actually occurred before he wrote is not known.

After Jesus had uttered this shocking prediction, it was hardly surprising that some of the disciples wanted to know when this cataclysm would occur.

Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?

Jesus gave them no direct answer to the question of *when*; and later on in the same dialogue, he confided that he didn't know – or at least he didn't know the timetable for the whole series of events he outlined – that only the Father held that secret.

That fact alone should be a caution for us in how we are to view this passage from Mark, and its parallels in Matthew and Luke. As a young man, I encountered for a period a group of Christians who were focused on prophecy. They were convinced – as people have been literally in every period of Christian history – that various writings in the Bible, if read correctly, reveal what the future holds. They would cobble together passages from the prophets, the odd psalm, and other odds and sods from the Old Testament, with their particular reading of Revelation – they *loved*

Revelation! – to create a narrative about the end of the world. And this passage from Mark, along with its parallels, figured prominently. They believed that this allowed them to read “the signs of the times”, to know the progress of God’s unfolding scenario, which would lead eventually to the return of Jesus and the great battle of Armageddon.

From time to time, we hear of groups who have followed that line predicting with certainty the date, time and place of Jesus’ return – all too often somewhere in the United States, as it happens – only to be left waiting and disappointed by the event that did not materialise. Few of these people would acknowledge that they have ignored Jesus’ clear statement that *no one* – including himself – knows the day or the hour. To read our passage from Mark in that way is to *misread* it, and to *misuse* it. The reality is that Jesus was speaking of the immediate situation of the disciples whom he was addressing. He was not prognosticating for all generations to come about the indefinite future.

The Temple that lay beneath Jesus and his disciples, and which had sparked this discourse, was ever under the watchful eye of the Roman garrison stationed in Jerusalem. In the New Testament itself, we hear enough about the situation in Judaea to know that tensions were always high. Jewish aspirations for independence, which crystalised around a variety of messianic movements, brought swift responses from the Romans. Jesus’ own crucifixion was almost certainly the result of the doubtless misunderstood claim that he was the rightful King of the Jews. As I mentioned, full-scale war did indeed break out in AD66, and didn’t finally end until AD73, with the fall of the desert fortress of Masada. So Jesus’ warning to his disciples spoke to a real and immediate situation.

His followers, he warned, would encounter phoney messiahs; there would be “wars and rumours of wars”; there would be earthquakes and famines. All the things that he spoke of were in the immediate; we’re told that there was even an earthquake around the time of the Jewish War. But, Jesus insists, these things do *not* signal “the end” – “the end is still to come.” “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” What Jesus was doing was trying to ensure that his disciples were *not* misled into thinking that the time had come to throw in their lot with some would-be “messiah”. He was trying to forewarn them of imminent dangers, and to keep them safe.

And his warning continued:

... they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me... Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name.

As we know so well from Acts and Paul’s letters – and as Mark, writing around AD70, certainly knew – these things did come to pass in the early Church. They have continued in different places for all the centuries since, and they continue in many parts of the world today. Jesus was far from promising his followers either an easy passage, or that their inevitable suffering would portend imminent deliverance.

So what can *we* take from this passage, words directed to the disciples two thousand years ago, in a different place and a vastly different situation? I would like to suggest two things, and they both have to do with our faith and upon what it is based. First, the disciple who enthused so proudly about the magnificent Temple, and who, along with his fellows, was so shocked at the thought that it might be destroyed, obviously put great stock in the grandeur and apparent permanence of the building. It was so massive, the stones of its construction were so huge – how could it possibly be in any way vulnerable? Most of us share some of that attitude, I think. We invest things with a permanence and a stability that gives us a sense of security, but blinds us to the reality of the inevitability of change. It may not be a building or any physical construction; it can as easily be an institution, a custom, a paradigm. For example, who ever thought that a time would come when

virtually no one would ever post a letter, or write a cheque? Yet those apparently immovable, indispensable activities have almost passed into history.

There were those in the 1950s and 1960s, when churches were full and their coffers replete, who could not imagine a time when that would not be so. Large new buildings bespoke the optimism born of apparent success. Who envisaged that all Churches in Australia, indeed across the Western world, would face the massive declines in membership and attendance that ensued? Resting our faith on our myopia is a formula for disappointment and despair. The writer of Psalm 127 wrote many years before Jesus' reminder about the Temple,

*Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.*

Jesus' warning about the destruction of the Temple is a caution to us about where we should, and should not, invest our faith.

The second lesson we might take from this "little apocalypse" is Jesus' assurance to his disciples. Yes, suffering would inevitably come, and times would certainly be tough. *But the one who endures to the end will be saved.* Of course Jesus is not talking about "survival of the fittest" –not suggesting that only those who can get through the physical and mental anguish unscathed are of any value. What he *is* saying is that those who cling to their faith, in the face of such challenges and temptations to abandon or compromise it, *will be saved.* This was great encouragement to the martyrs of the early Church; it is great encouragement to those who are made to suffer for their faith in Jesus in so many places today; and it should be great encouragement to us too. Not that most of us face such dreadful trials – we are blessed to live in a nation where we are free to practise our Christian faith. For us, the greatest temptation to abandon our faith derives from our sheer affluence, from the materialism of the world that surrounds us, from the easy delusion that we have no need of God in our comfortable lives because we are so secure and so well looked-after. Those are surely some of the key factors that led to the huge drop in Church membership in Western nations in recent decades. But like the Temple, there is nothing necessarily permanent about our affluence. Our prosperity depends on the dramatically deteriorating natural systems that the world's politicians seem incapable of coming together to preserve; a major conflict, such as seems to be growing alarmingly more likely in our region, could devour our national resources and leave our national infrastructure a ruined shell of itself; even an economically irresponsible government could destroy our prosperity. If our faith is in our riches, then we have been warned. But if our faith is in God, we are assured that *the one who endures to the end will be saved.*

Jesus' message to us is, in fact, much the same as it was to his disciples, although our situations are vastly different. It was *not* about reading the "signs of the times"; in fact it was a strong discouragement from any temptation to try to do so. It *was* a robust reminder that there is but one person in whom to place our faith; that person is Jesus Christ. Come the false messiahs that history throws up from time to time, come wars and rumours of war, come earthquakes and famines; come affluence and the temptations of riches; Jesus Christ will never disappoint, and *the one who endures to the end will be saved.*

Amen