

Pentecost 24 14 November 2021

Mark 13:1-8

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As I said last week, we are approaching the END...the end of the church year and the end of Mark's Gospel. Last week we looked at the story of the poor widow and the fact that the temple system has become exploitative of the poor.

This week, we find Jesus coming out of the temple. The disciples (being slow as usual) have missed entirely the point of Jesus' teaching about the corruption of the temple and are still captivated by the external appearance and glory of the buildings. "Look teacher – what large stones and what large buildings". Jesus announces to them that it is all passing away – it will all fall down – not one stone of this magnificent structure will be left.

There are some aspects of the Gospel which are very hard to enter into for us who live in this peaceful tranquil life of ours in Australia. There are whole generations of Australians who have never had any first hand experience of war – who have not been shot hand, bombed or blown up. So if we, in peaceful Australia, are going to really hear what God might be saying to us in Mark Chapter 13, then we will need to make a leap of imagination into the violent world of the first century.

The Gospel of Mark is written at a time when many Jews are getting so fed up with their Roman occupiers that they are breeding terrorist cells. It is the period in which the Romans will stamp on such revolutionary activities by coming into Jerusalem and razing the temple to the ground in 70AD. The temple was never rebuilt. All that remains is the Western Wall – now known as the wailing wall. At this wall, Jews still weep for the loss of their tradition, their people, their children.

As Jesus said, not one stone would be left standing upon another. He says to his disciples, "nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines". This is a description of the world which is, regrettably, has been true of every generation. And yet this is also the world in which God is bringing about his kingdom. Two thousand years later, circumstances don't appear to have changed dramatically. And yet, there is this hopeful statement by Jesus, "this is but the beginning of the birth pangs".

It seems that the kingdom of God's peace is not born easily.....like any birth it is surrounded by risk, pain and occasionally even death. It seems that there is something inherent in humanity which resists the birth of new life....the theological word for that is "SIN"....and the outworking of Sin is the kinds of things that Jesus describes – wars, fighting, famines.

So how DOES God bring about God's kingdom?

The beginning of Mark's Gospel –begins with a great hope. Jesus announced a presently occurring reality – Mark 1:14 *“the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near”*.

Now any Jew, who knew their history, would have started to get a tingle of excitement when their heard Jesus say this.

Their minds would have cast back to the book of Daniel. The story of Daniel is set within the time of the Babylonian conquest, but most scholars believe that the book itself was actually assembled about 165 years before Christ – when the temple was profaned by the Syrian Tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes 4<sup>th</sup> (in 167BCE).

The book of Daniel talks about a four headed beast trampling over the world. The four heads of the beast most probably represent four empires which trampled the Jewish people – the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians and the Greeks. The fourth beast, “terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet” (Daniel 7:7).

In other words, this last brought the latest technology of war – the Greeks carried in the helicopter gun ships of their time – and reeked a terrible havoc.

It's worth listening to two promises which are buried within the book of Daniel – promises which give a war-weary people hope.

*Daniel 2:44 “and in the days of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people:*

*Daniel 7:13 “I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven....to him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away and his kingdom is one that shall never be destroyed”*.

*Daniel 12:1-2 At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of the people shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered”*

So what did people hear when Jesus announced, at the beginning of this ministry, *“the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near”*?

They heard a promise is filled with hope – not just a pie in the sky when you did hope – but this earthly hope. They would have been wondering if this Jesus could be the one who had come to fulfil the vision of Daniel – this could be the one who has come to set up free.

But what does the church make of this promise of the Kingdom when Jesus is crucified? What does a fledgling church make of this promise of the kingdom of God when the temple is destroyed? What does the church do when neighbours come along and say – we're putting together a fighting force to take on the Romans. Will you join us?

When one's husband or children have been killed or tortured there is a very strong temptation to react and try to bring peace at the end of a sword. But Jesus's instructions are clear. He says two things: "beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say "I am he" and they will lead many astray"

And secondly...."when you hear of wars, do not be alarmed....this much take place, but the end is still to come".

The end is God's Kingdom. The end is the New Jerusalem....coming down out of heaven adorned like a bride for her husband (Revelation 21). That is the end of the Bible story. Our story as Christians has a trajectory of hope. The end of the story is meeting face to face the crucified and risen Lord.

And how do we know? We know because of the resurrection. The resurrection is the current promise of the end game.

We have a friend who is very keen on soccer – in the dark ages of VCR's he would tape the World Cup so that he could watch it first thing in the morning. He would not be happy if someone told him the result of the game before he had watched it. But in the Christian story we know the end score – we know the result of the game, and it's called resurrection – which plays itself out as the coming kingdom now, of a future will only be fully realised in our future. The end is not in question – the only thing in questions is the means.

When I quoted Jesus from Mark chapter 1, with his promise of the kingdom, I missed the second half of the sentence:

*"the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near"?*

How does the sentence end?

*"repent and believe in the Good News"*

If the first part is the goal then the second part is the means.

The coming of God's kingdom of justice and peace is certain – in fact it is already coming about now. *Wars and Famines are part of human resistance to the coming kingdom.* Violence remains part of our human condition BUT we are on a trajectory towards what Paul called the New Creation. That end is a certainty but we cannot force the kingdom to come about by the logic of violence. The only way to peace is peace. That's what repentance means – it means to say "yes" as God reorients our desire to God through the Holy Spirit.

When we see stories of war on our evening news, Jesus tells us to not let our hearts be troubled. Do not get captivated by big fancy buildings like the Temple. All that is temporary and passing away. Our contribution to peace is peace. Contemplative Prayer constitutes part of that listening for and being part of God's peace each day.