

In Times of Great Anxiety, We Need to Know that Someone Cares

18 November, 2018

Reading: Mark 13:1-8

Last week's Remembrance Sunday called to mind the story of a bombing raid over Germany. Suddenly the first thud rocked the plane, a shell from the anti-aircraft guns below had hit the fuselage. Some quick prayers were offered up and the crew braced for the explosion. Then more thuds. The thuds kept coming. Each man's eyes were filled with fear just waiting for the explosion and the death that would surely follow. It seemed they had been badly hit but for some reason they were still flying. They all knew the dreadful statistics that forty percent of the bombers they were flying never came back. The bomber had gaping holes all through it but somehow it made it back to England. On landing safely, the shells were carefully taken from the plane and each one dismantled. It turned out that each contained not an explosive charge, but a carefully scrolled piece of paper with a message in the Czech language.

It seems the Czech slave labourers who had been forced to assemble the shells did what they could for their allies. They had, with breathtaking courage, not put explosive in the bombs. Rather they had written a message. The message read. "This is all we can do for you now." By risking their own lives, they had given a sign of hope and solidarity. "This is all we can do for you now."

Today our Gospel is just such a message of hope and solidarity. That someone does care and that person is Jesus Christ.

Jesus and the disciples were walking around the temple in Jerusalem. It was the biggest and grandest building they would ever have seen. Herod the Great had begun adding to it. It was not finished and it would be even more grand when it was. The slogan for Jerusalem in AD33 could have been "You think it's grand now!" I was thinking about slogans for cities. Wellington has "You can't beat Wellington on a good day." They had one in 1967 and no one can forget it. I was in Auckland last Thursday and the average speed on the trip computer on the taxi taking me to the meeting was 17 kilometres per hour. Auckland's slogan could be,

“Great motorway, never saw the city.” Dunedin's could be “Great city, couldn't find the motorway.” And Christchurch's slogan could be is “It's going to great when it's finished.” The disciples were marvelling at the huge stones and the sheer size of the temple. Jesus quickly brings them down to earth. “See these stones,” he says, “The day is coming when not one of them will be left on another. All will be thrown down.” Of course, for the Jew, the temple was much more than just a collection of mighty stones it was the very heart of their cultural and religious life, and the very seat of God on earth. It was unthinkable then that the temple should fall. Jesus is making himself very unpopular for suggesting that the temple would be destroyed. He was like the prophets before him Jeremiah and Micah who foresaw the demise of the first temple.

We know that in AD66 the Romans did indeed ransack the temple and it was totally destroyed. No doubt the early Christian community looked back on these words of Jesus and drew comfort. “Do not be alarmed he said, these are only the birth pangs.”

We shouldn't find it difficult to relate to the anxiety that having your central religious symbol destroyed can create. Who would have thought that the Cathedral in the Square would lie in ruins after a massive earthquake? Or who would have thought St Peter's would be a ruin, or I should say who would have thought it would be to be restored from a ruin to a building beyond its former glory?

In the life of our city we know destructive things but we also know them in our own lives. It might be that we face ill health or the loss of a loved one, or a broken relationship, the loss of a home, or the loss of job or income. All these upheavals in our own lives make for times of great anxiety. Surely no one in the face of such times can say don't be alarmed.

Julian Of Norwich lived in the very worst of times. She lived in thirteenth century England. The demon of black death was everywhere, the principalities of Europe were constantly at war and famine was common. Julian was an Anchorite, a religious recluse. She lived in a tiny room and garden beside the parish church in

Norwich. She devoted herself totally to prayer and giving counsel. Many came to her window for counsel including royalty and peasants. At one point she almost died and, on that deathbed, God revealed a message to her. She later wrote about it. She was first person to write in the new trendy language - English. The message God gave her was “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.”

Jesus is the sign that we need. He embodies the very hope that is at the core of our existence, our DNA. As Christians we are a people of hope and we are bearers of hope to a needy world.

St Paul too faced times almost too great to endure and he used the image of childbirth - it is painful and dangerous but the outcome is one of joy beyond all knowing. I nearly missed the birth of our firstborn altogether. I thought midwives were warm and caring. Half way through Christina's birth the midwife turned to me and said “Would you mind going and having shower and then coming back!” Maybe she was being warm and caring to everyone else in the room.

Today then God is unlocking the secrets of our DNA as Christians. We are a people of hope. God is sending us a message of hope, like the Czech workers sent theirs or as Julian recorded hers, or like St Paul’ s image of the birth process, but this time the message is on the lips of Jesus.

“Do not be alarmed.” he says to us. “Do not be alarmed when you hear wars and rumours of wars. Do not be alarmed when your most treasured buildings collapse. Do not be alarmed when your life seems to be going badly, when you face illness or uncertainty of any kind. Because: “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.”