

Pentecost 25
18/11/2012

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 1:4-20

Magnificat

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

Sermon preached by Rev Harry Kerr

Jesus' words at the beginning of to-day's gospel, his prophecy that this marvellous structure would soon be in ruins must have been a bit close to the bone for you when your own temple is looking a bit shaky. They remind us that nothing is permanent, that our beautiful buildings and our foundational institutions are only provisional. There will come a time when they cease to exist and we will have to learn to live without them. It may happen suddenly and disastrously or if they may just fade away and cease to be relevant.

Jesus words are grim. This is not a gospel passage to which we turn when we seek words of comfort. It is a passage to which we would rather not turn at all. It is nevertheless highly significant. The temple in Jesus day was the centre of Jewish life. It was the sign of God's presence with his people. It was also a significant employer and commercial institution in its own right, a sort of cross between the cathedral and the big end of town. It was also a powerful religious institution which exploited people for its own purposes. The building was a powerful presence. Josephus, a contemporary historian, tells us that: *it was covered with plates of gold of great weight. At the first rise of the sun they reflected back a fiery splendour which made those who forced themselves to look upon it to avert their eyes away just as they would have done at the sun's own rays.* It was overwhelming. It seemed very permanent and indestructible. It makes the Sydney Opera House a bit of an also ran. Jesus sees beyond it. One day soon it will be a pile of rubble and all the things which go on there will cease to exist. Jesus often criticised the temple. He disrupted its commercial activities and criticised it for becoming a money making enterprise. It had lost its moral and spiritual authority. However it is likely that our passage reflects a very unsettled time in Jerusalem when the Jewish people had risen against Rome who was about to brutally suppress them. Their symbols of their identity would be destroyed. The early Christians, like everyone else, would be asking: *"What will become of us? Who will be? Where will we finish up?"* Jesus warns there will be all sorts of attempts to get them to join in the violence or to play safe and stick with the Romans as the price of survival. The community itself would be bitterly divided.

When we look at the world to-day we might say: *In the Middle East nothing changes.* Events in Syria remind us of the turbulence, violence and uncertainty in which innocent people can be caught up. A few weeks ago I met and heard Mother Agnes Mariam of the Cross, a nun who has founded a monastery in Homs, where some of the worst violence had taken place, to be a place of peace and reconciliation. She and many others are anxious that the true story be told, which is quite different to what we hear in our media. A peaceful movement for change, to replace a dictatorship and create a just and democratic, has been taken over by militants from outside the country, bankrolled and armed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar as well as the western powers. People are pulled this way and that and are uncertain which we to turn as

they see their society collapsing around them with terrible loss of life. Meanwhile church leaders and Muslim leaders are working to create a space of non violence and reconciliation where lasting change can be worked out.

Nearer home we do not feel so threatened by wars and rumours of wars but this does not mean that our temples are safe. Many of them already have been converted into apartments are have disappeared altogether to make ways for supermarkets. Like the temple we seem to be losing influence and respect in the community. Last Wednesday while taking our Guide Dog puppy on a city walk we came on the Christmas windows at Myers. Already people are crowding around them and barriers have been erected so that this can happen in an orderly way. The windows are pretty awful. Don't bother taking your grandchildren. Right at the end, away from the crowd barriers, away from the people is another window that no-one is bothering about. That window is the nativity scene.

Our thoughts are focussed by last week's news into of the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse in he churches and other institutions. I have followed a little the similar commission in Ireland. It took a long time. It was thorough and when it reported the Catholic Church was hung out to dry and its authority seriously undermined. We can expect the same here not just for the catholic community but for all the churches and for the whole community. We will be faced with many things about ourselves about which we would rather not know. Symbolically, we may see our traditional temples falling down around our ears. The institutions which have given us meaning and hope, which have opened the way to God and underpinned our community may be laid bare. We may experience a similar confusion to the people in Jerusalem then and the people of Syria and the Middle East now. The church as we have known it may be seen to be morally unsustainable.

Many people will offer us new and exotic alternatives. Jesus warns us to be careful not to be pulled this way and that. Jesus foreshadows scenarios which are becoming very familiar: *For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.* But then he says: *This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.* Some things must be dealt with whatever the cost. But that is never the end of the story. We have to face the fact that many of the things we values most are provisional. They have use-by dates. They are flawed because they are made up of flawed people. When you put people together in an institution they often do things they would never do as individuals. There must be a cleansing, maybe a falling apart. Maybe the spirit behind these institutions will implode. Some of the greatest temples the world has every seen are the Angkor Watt temples in Cambodia. They are signs of a remarkable civilisation and spirituality. To-day they are in ruins...not because of any war or destruction but because people walked away form them for reasons we don't understand. The spirit collapsed. That can happen to the church, maybe it is already happening. Jesus describes this as birth pangs: God's opportunity to bring to birth something new. Jesus on the cross takes the destruction into himself. He comes into the falling apart. For those who don't panic, if we can hang in and stick with the way of Jesus we can be born again. The life of God will begin again as something new.

During the Cultural Revolution, the church in China lost everything, buildings, ministers, books, schools, colleges, opportunities to meet for worship. After the Cultural Revolution there were ten times more Christians in China
