

anguish and new life
 a sermon preached on the
twenty-fifth sunday after Pentecost
 15 November 2015
 at
st john's
 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
 by the Reverend Helen Creed

lections: Daniel 12:1-3; Ps 16; Heb 10: 11-14, 19-25; Mark 13: 1-11

I'm not sure whether you have heard of a practice called "mindfulness"? It's a bit in vogue in education right now and involves becoming more aware, or mindful, of the present moment. One key way of doing this is to spend some time each day, 5 minutes or so, paying attention to your body & how it is feeling: that's one part of it . . . and the other part is to do with noticing all the thoughts that come and go in each instant, and here the discipline is to notice but not judge these thoughts. The purpose is to eventually become detached from your thoughts, so that you aren't compelled by them. At the school where I work a number of staff are taking a course in mindfulness, run by someone from Monash Uni. I'm not giving a sermon on mindfulness! But last week I had a conversation with one of my colleagues that I want to recount as a stepping off point for this sermon today. My colleague and I were comparing notes on our experience of mindfulness practice as opposed to our experience of prayer. This led on to a discussion of what happens in prayer. My colleague's father is ailing at the moment and she is feeling very churned up about that – she told me that when she prays for him each night, she prays that he will find inner peace – "Is that ok?", she said, "does everyone ask God for things in prayer, or are there other ways of praying?" It was a question coming from a real desire to be involved with God in an authentic way, especially in a time of trial. This sermon is in many ways a response to that question.

When commentators ask questions about Mark, chapter 13, they mostly ask how this section of the gospel reflects historical events that were experienced by the early church. We think the calamities described here refer to the experience of this the church around Mark, who were facing hostility both from the synagogue and the Roman overlords. The Roman-Jewish War, which went from 66 to 74 CE was in the background, and that included the catastrophic destruction of the Temple in the year 70 by the Romans. This has led to a lot of scholarly debate about whether Mark was written before or after the destruction of the Temple, debate about who exactly was leading church members astray, debate about who or what the "desolating sacrilege" was (it's mentioned in verse 14 if you are interested). I'm sure some find this extremely interesting but the questions I want to explore with you this morning are going to take us in a different direction.

While these verses from Mark ostensibly describe things on the outside: great buildings being thrown down, people being handed over to councils and being physically beaten, I want to take the approach that these images are also great for describing our inner experience. Our inner landscapes can become quite apocalyptic, can't they? We experience anguish and turmoil, earthquake and conflict, betrayal and violence within ourselves. We might try to live in denial of this, we can try to protect ourselves, to do all we can to ensure that life stays on a steady path – here in the 21st century, we can put all our trust in technology to keep trauma at bay, but, in the end, we all go through anguish of one sort or another.

And this leads me to the questions that I'd like to explore with you today. What is the place of anguish in human life? And what can we expect from God when life turns apocalyptic?

Our passage today starts with Jesus and the disciples leaving the Temple, for the last time as it turns out. Once outside, the disciples respond to the Temple's greatness with words very familiar to any of us who have been tourists! "Look teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" they say, you can almost see them reaching for their phones in order to take a selfie. (Roger and I had the great honour recently, to be in St Mark's in Venice with only 20 other people – and a guide called Moses - we were there at 8 o'clock at night, and yes, two members of our party, lined up the sanctuary and took selfies with the sanctuary as the backdrop) Jesus, of course, is not in the Temple as a tourist and he quickly interrupts by predicting that every one of those stones will be "thrown down". This jolts Peter, James, John and Andrew out of their reverie about the wonders of human engineering: they interpret Jesus' words as a sign that the end-time is imminent, and they ask Jesus, in private, to give them the inside knowledge: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

As usual, it's the wrong the question, so Jesus, as usual, ignores it, and speaks to the disciples in such a way that it becomes clear that the end as they imagine it, the glorious end that they want to be lifted up into, is not about to happen. Rather, Jesus describes to them a time of trouble that he says "must take place". This is "the beginning of the birth pangs," Jesus says. With this metaphor, Jesus invites these four men to understand the new creation that they so long to be part of, as something that is *being born*. Now I can't remember being born myself, but I can imagine that being born was not the most welcome of experiences – we are forced out into the open when we've been in the watery comfort of the womb, we now have to find a source of food rather than having everything supplied, there is light and dark and noise and temperature to contend with. But if we are going to be born, there is no other way!

And just so, with the emergence of the New Creation. The way Jesus sees it, turbulence is an essential stage in the emergence of the new and lovely, something to be lived with, and lived through, without losing hope. This leads Jesus to offer some advice to the disciples about what will be most helpful for the disciples during this time: patience not panic, endurance not avoidance, a kind of detachment from judgement, not worrying too much about what you will say.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not advocating seeking out pain, as if it's some kind of divine freeway, or refusing to accept medication or treatment or telling people that some difficulty is actually a blessing from God in disguise. Some difficulties are created by other

human beings, some difficulties are because things have gone wrong in our bodies. There are clearly some sorts of human anguish that we need to do all we can to relieve, and we are blessed in this part of history, to have so many resources to do that.

What I am reflecting on this morning, however, is what I think is the great Christian hope: that anguish in life can actually open things up for us, rather than close things down.

And this is not to do with some sort of heroic response to adversity on our part, by which we conquer the pain. It's about facing up to our anguish with whatever honesty and hopefulness we can muster up, from our very ordinary and meagre resources. It's about not running away, but *living with some sort of hopeful curiosity about what might happen next*. Then, I think, in God's care, devastating events can be the very means by which we are born into a life beyond our most hopeful imaginings, a life of depth rather than surface, of reality rather than fantasy, the kind of life that is the promise of the God who has suffered the most terrible anguish of being rejected by those he deeply loves, and who has turned that anguish into a sign of love. As we approach God's table this morning, let us be mindful of God's care for us in all the circumstances of our lives, let us bring our honest prayers and questions, and let us relax into the future God is bringing to be. Amen