

“This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.” These are the final words in our Reading from Mark 13 today. Of course, it is always dangerous for a male of the species, to comment on such a phrase as “the beginning of the birthpangs”, but I think now that I am the installed pastor I am allowed to take on the challenge of talking about such a phrase, such an issue, even if I am a guy! The term “birthpangs” implies several things – pain and discomfort, often extreme pain and discomfort; it is a phrase that carries us to the edge, to the boundary of hope and fear, life and death; it implies the promise of new beginnings, of a starting over, of a changed tomorrow. Of new joy’s, new responsibilities, new opportunities, new life.

Certainly all of these thoughts are present in Jesus’ use of this phrase in an exchange with the disciples. This conversation between Jesus and the disciples started when Jesus gave what they thought was a very strange response to their sincerely offered, words of respect and appreciation for the grandeur of the Jerusalem Temple. For once the disciples thought they were on pretty safe ground, knowing they had let Jesus down so often with their words and attitudes, surely to say nice things about the House of the Lord they couldn’t mess up! They are stunned – stunned into silence by Jesus responding that yes these are great, magnificent, impressive buildings but they will be destroyed, torn down, flattened. The Temple, the center of civil and legal administration – no more!

The Temple the symbol of struggle and freedom, a monument to struggles of the past, a reminder of the glory days – destroyed!

The Temple, the nation’s emotional centre, the heartbeat of Israel – decimated!

The Temple, the very center of their nation’s life – the living symbol of their people’s religious life, their link, their direct link, to Yahweh - gone! No more!

The terror of such a thought, visions of the pain over what this would mean, the horror over how this could happen and all that it might mean stunned the disciples! They walked - in silence – with Jesus – they walked through and outside the city walls, across the valley of the Kidron, until they found a spot on the Mount of Olives where they mustered up the courage to ask Jesus, when this would happen, what would be the warning signs and what could it possibly mean. Notice the detail in the text on this point - Jesus was “sitting” – Jesus was sitting implying that He was in the mode of a Teacher, just as at the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus sat down to teach, the posture of a teacher in that culture was to be seated.

So here is the scene, Jesus has sacred the disciples witless by His response to their seemingly innocent comment. Jesus, and the disciples have come outside the city walls, Jesus has found a place to be seated and the disciples ask Him, their Teacher, to say some more....

And the first thing Jesus says is at first glance more than strange. The disciples are all agog over proud buildings and thoughts of their destruction and Jesus says, "Beware that no one leads you astray." I want to ask you to view this whole scene and the implications of what is going on here in this way. The Temple will soon be no more, the Temple, THE way of relating to God is to be destroyed, ended, finished, obliterated. Beware, beware that no one leads you astray because right here, in this conversation and relationship between the disciples and Jesus, "outside the city walls", the disciples are in the presence of the One who will replace the Temple, the One in whose life there will be and is a new relationship, a new covenant between God and humanity. In Jesus, the Teacher, Savior, Lord, sat in their presence, there is the new pattern and access creating friendship and fellowship between God and all creation. Jesus is the new Temple – a Temple into which all are invited, in which there is an equal welcome for all, Jesus the new "Temple" is One that gives and offers, the Temple that dies yet is brought to life all over again. This is why the first words from Jesus are, "Beware that no one leads you astray."

This passage asks of us a radical response, a very radical response. We are being asked to renounce our faith and trust in anything else or anyone else in order that we might be freed to commit our lives to trusting in only One Person, the One who will so quickly move from teaching "outside the city walls" to dying "outside the city walls", even Jesus Christ the Lord.

It is a radical thing to say even in 21st Century America that we are to trust in Jesus Christ. It is a radical thing to say many would suggest especially in 21st Century America that we are to trust in Jesus Christ. It is a radical thing to say because as a people we are enmeshed, caught, trapped even, in a web of commitments that often turn out to be contradictory, even when to begin with they seem so benign or maybe even helpful.

For example, as good Presbyterians we are taught to work hard, to do our homework, to apply the benefits of our education and use our gifts. And we do this and some of us, maybe even many of us, start to gain monetary or financial reward for our efforts, for the skills we have to sell, the acumen we show. And as we make our way up the corporate ladder, or as we build our empire, or as we see our success rewarded, our mind, our focus, our trust becomes divided. When we started things seemed and were simpler, faith came easier, now we have assets to worry over; second homes to maintain; extra cars or boats or motorbikes to insure; we are presented with such a range of opportunities that weekly faithful participation in worship or commitment to a Sunday School Class or a Study Group become something unthinkable, we have other claims on our loyalty that claim us, that get in the way of that One relationship that really matters, the relationship with Jesus, our Savior, our Lord.

And the truth is very often the church has been the beneficiary of some of the generosity of those of whom we say, "They are making their way in the world." We know that the past year or so has been incredibly difficult and challenging for churches and charities and non-profit organizations. But you know it is not too long ago when things were in general, a whole lot better, when charitable giving increased – donations came easier when there was a rising stock market and housing market, when unemployment was low, and job prospects good.

Is it possible, that just as the thought of the destruction of the Temple meant that the disciples could not imagine a faithful future, that the economic fear that grips us today is revealing that we had placed too much of our trust, in systems, in profits, in material wealth, in ourselves, rather than having our whole trust in the One we name as Savior and Lord? Is it possible that we are reaping what we have been sowing by somehow imagining that a strong dollar or low inflation or Dow 15,000 or the inexorable rise of some system or another that benefits some to the exclusion of others, rather than have a clear, unambiguous, determined commitment to Jesus Christ? Is it, is it possible that we have drifted away from the faith passed down to us by generations who knew struggle and sacrifice, despair and desolation, world war and the threat of nuclear war, yet never turned from committing themselves, heart and soul to their faith, their church, their community.

Over last fall and winter when I would travel on behalf of Presbyterian College I would attend many Presbytery Meetings across the South East. I would hear a litany of despair, of how funding was being lost, gifts stopped, donations down, budgets cut. On almost every such occasion, someone would state

in a speech or Report the phrase, “we live in uncertain times.” Eventually I couldn’t stand it anymore and started including in my remarks the comment that I believe to be true and believe to be the clear witness of Scripture – that we ALWAYS live in uncertain times – that is exactly what Jesus was saying to the disciples, we DON’T KNOW the day or the hour, we ALWAYS NEED TO BE READY.

The “we live in uncertain times” statement implies that because of the economic downturn we are living in uncertain times, implying that they/we have been living in “certain” times when the economy was going gangbusters, evidence enough for me to assert, that part of our trust had shifted, if you will, away from the Lord to the Chairman of the Federal Reserve!

I am not sure I understand or could suggest all the implications that we might take from this sermon. It is a rather un Jim Simpson-like sermon in that sense but I know there are implications, consequences, responses asked of all of us, because all of us need to know when the end is not the end, all of us need to be sure that we are truly and ever more fully focused on the end that matters, the end of trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives – this is the end, the purpose of our lives.

So I leave you all to apply this passage of scripture, this strange passage of scripture and this strange sermon based upon it – to your life.

Maybe you hear a call to faith, to a growing faith, a deeper, more thoughtful, more intentional faith!

Maybe you hear this sermon as an echo of Tom Horton’s charge to the church last Sunday to followership!

Maybe you catch a vision for what it means for all of us to direct a truly fitting portion of all we own and have and share for the tasks to which we are called as a church!

Maybe you hear the call to give, to give not of your abundance but to give of yourself, of your heart, of your life.

Maybe you hear a call to keep awake, to live in the present, to not get stuck in the past, to not be concerned about yesterday; nor to nurture nightmares about the future worried about all that might happen.

Maybe you hear a reminder that God is in control and the Holy Spirit continues to work – speaking to us and empowering us, to be the people of God living and serving together in plenty and in want, in

sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow. That is the end that is the end - wedded together, wedded to God, wedded to God's future! The End.

PS In AD 70 the Temple was destroyed, the Roman legions paraded the Temple treasures through the streets of Jerusalem, the seeming victory of Caesar over Yahweh? The Gospel of Mark was compiled/completed at around this very time, Mark is therefore a wartime or crisis Gospel. The Temple never was rebuilt, Mark's message for our "time of crisis" remains. Amen.