

Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 33B, Nov 15, 2015
Mark 13:1-8

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

In Jerusalem today, some of the most interesting archeological sites come from the time of King Herod the Great. King Herod came to power in Palestine in year 38 before Christ and began one of the most prolific building campaigns in the history of the area. When he died 4 years before Christ, his kingdom was divided between his 3 sons: Antipas, Philip and Archelaus, and he left the many monuments he had constructed in their care. Probably Herod's most important achievement was re-building the Temple that had originally been constructed by King Solomon, destroyed by the Babylonians, and restored by Zerubbabel in the 6th century before Christ. But the next 500-odd years took their toll and so re-building the Temple was an important part of Herod the Great's kingdom-building.

Today, more than 2000 years later, the most important remnant of Herod's magnificent Temple is known as the Western Wall. It is considered the holiest site for the Jewish people. In Herod's time, the Western Wall was actually part of the support wall for the huge new platform Herod built for the new and improved Temple. Adjacent to the Western Wall today is Jerusalem's Archaeological Park where you can stand at the base of the south-west corner of the Temple wall and imagine what it might have been like 2000 years ago. The size and quality of the stones is remarkable but what is most stunning when you're standing on the ancient street running next to the wall, where an ancient market likely operated - lively and colourful... most stunning is standing beside a dent in the great stones of the street, cracked by a huge stone pillar, pushed over during the destruction of Herod's Temple less than 100 years after it was completed. In the first century, Jewish unrest culminated in the First Jewish Revolt stretching from 66-74 after Christ, with the definitive event being the near complete destruction of the Temple and much of the city with it, in year 70. The cracks in the sidewalk, next to the massive remnant of a support wall and the holy site of the Western Wall, where you can stand today, testify to the grandeur of the events.

There is some debate among scholars today as to whether Mark's Gospel was written before or after those fateful days in year 70 when Jerusalem and Herod's Temple were destroyed. Either way, the Gospel most certainly reflects the chaos and fear of that time of great upheaval and uncertainty. By the time the Gospel was written, something was ending, or had ended, and something was being born. But I doubt those faithful disciples living through it all could see past their own lives and their own experience to understand anything of the big picture of history and their role within it. Mostly, I think, all they could do was hold on to hope that everything would work out in the end.

In chapter 11 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus entered Jerusalem with great fanfare and has since been spending his time teaching in the Temple where various religious leaders have challenged his authority. In parables and in response to direct questions, Jesus has silenced his opponents, one by one. Today the story pauses as Jesus speaks for the whole of chapter 13 before the story

resumes with the beginning of the passion narrative. Today, as we approach the end of our liturgical year, we pause with Jesus and his first disciples, to consider what will happen following Jesus' death and on to the end of time.

Jesus and his disciples are departing the Temple for the day and perhaps it is a moment of awe at the grandeur - the holiness and history and magnificence - of the Temple, that causes one to comment: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" I doubt there is much that could have prepared them for Jesus' next words: "Do you see these great buildings?" Jesus replies, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Jesus leaves it at that... with the disciples surely reeling... as they walk across to the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Temple.

When they arrive and settle into their spot on the Mount of Olives, gathered together privately, Jesus' closest disciples ask him to elaborate on his most stunning and disturbing prediction: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" The anxiety behind the questions reflects the social turmoil and civil strife not only of Jesus' time but that of his followers in the next several decades, the community from and to which Mark wrote, and their experience of the revolt that brought devastating destruction.

"Beware," Jesus begins the long speech that goes on for 30 more verses, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars... [when you hear of deficits and rumours of deficits]... do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; [there will be mass shootings and suicide bombs... there will be terror and displaced peoples...] there will be famines." It is hardly an exhaustive list of terrible events and every generation has its own variety of chaos and conflict. It seems worse today... with hundreds dead this week in Paris, in Beirut, in Baghdad... and yet I wonder how many tragic events would have been lamented on social media in the tumultuous and violent first century? What will be the sign, the disciples wonder, that the end is near? And Jesus warns them not to be led astray... even in the face of war and oppression and hunger... remember who you are and hold on to hope.

For the list of terrible events is not the end, Jesus says. Instead, he goes on: "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." From war and destruction to birth... it is a stunning reversal of imagery. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. If birth pangs are beginning, then a baby is coming... and babies are good news. Babies are the incarnation of love and hope. Birth pangs and babies are images of new life, not despair. And so Jesus offers a shift in perspective. It is a shift reflected in a story, a kind of thought experiment, originally written by a Hungarian writer... It goes like this:

In a mother's womb were two babies. One asked the other: "Do you believe in life after birth?" The other replied, "Why, of course. There has to be something after birth. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later."

"Nonsense" said the first. "There is no life after birth. What kind of life would that be?"

The second said, "I don't know, but there will be more light than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths. Maybe we will have other senses that we can't understand now."

The first replied, "That is absurd. Walking is impossible. And eating with our mouths? Ridiculous! The umbilical cord supplies nutrition and everything we need. But the umbilical cord is so short. Life after birth is to be logically excluded."

The second insisted, "Well I think there is something and maybe it's different than it is here. Maybe we won't need this physical cord anymore."

The first replied, "Nonsense. And moreover if there is life, then why has no one has ever come back from there? Birth is the end of life, and in the after-birth there is nothing but darkness and silence and oblivion. It takes us nowhere."

"Well, I don't know," said the second, "but certainly we will meet Mother and she will take care of us."

The first replied "Mother? You actually believe in Mother? That's laughable. If Mother exists then where is She now?"

The second said, "She is all around us. We are surrounded by her. We are of Her. It is in Her that we live. Without Her this world would not and could not exist."

Said the first: "Well I don't see Her, so it is only logical that She doesn't exist."

To which the second replied, "Sometimes, when you're in silence and you focus and you really listen, you can perceive Her presence, and you can hear Her loving voice, calling down from above."

~ Útmutató a Léleknek

Do you believe in life after birth? The beginning of birth pangs brings the end of pregnancy. Something ends and something new begins. As we approach the end of our year... the end of this long season of growth in the Spirit... what is it that might be ending in your life? What needs to end? And how could your ending include the beginning of birth pangs? Could there be more for us as the parish of St. Andrew's than the life we have already known? Could there be something new in your own life? New joy... new adventure... new... something that you can't quite put your finger on yet? Do you believe in life after birth?

In ancient times, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed and the Christian community was being birthed... Something was ending and something was being born... In our world today, we see much despair and destruction, senseless violence and hate... and so we are challenged to hold to hope that there may also be birth pangs of peace that bring about a transformation so profound that we cannot even imagine it yet. May the birth of peace and joy, forgiveness and love be right around the corner. May it begin with us. May it begin today.