

Mk. 13:1-8; Daniel 12.1-3; Hebrews 10.11-14, 19-25
2nd Sunday before Advent: 15th November 2015

O God, help us to listen to your Word with understanding, to receive it with faith, and to obey it with courage, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

'The beginning of the birth pangs' – it is a curious phrase isn't it? What does it mean, especially in relation to the main theme in the gospel, that of the destruction of the temple. And what, if anything, can any of this tell us in the gathering darkness of such brutal, evil, cowardice as demonstrated in Paris last Friday evening?

An understandable reaction would be to succumb to fear and fright, to stop gathering in public places, to proclaim outrage, to seek vengeance and retribution, to tighten up on security, surveillance and armed responses. But here in Britain at least, this must inevitably be at the further expense of our hard-fought for rights to privacy, human rights and personal freedoms.

The idea of judgment as described in Daniel is an unpalatable one to many Western Christians. This may be because, in our comparative riches, we are closer to the oppressors who are judged, than to the oppressed who are vindicated. I dare say that those evil, deluded fools who took up arms in Paris to deal such death and destruction genuinely felt that they were administering justice to an evil and corrupt western society – that this was worth a little collateral damage – the slaughter of innocents.

And inevitably, there will be those who want to see the tables turned on Isis and its indiscriminate cruelty, to be given a taste of its own medicine. I'm thinking of tabloid revelling in the death of the despicable 'Jihadi John'. An eye for an eye, etc.....but I can't help but feel that this is precisely what Isis would like to achieve, to make us more like them.

But let us pause here on the threshold of these thoughts and consider the letter to the Hebrews too. We hear about the pre-Christian priest standing day after day making offerings for sins, sins that could never truly be expunged in that way. But then we heard how, when Christ made his single sacrifice once and for all, he perfected for all time those who are thus sanctified.

There is great danger and great temptation at times like these to ignore or to stall at Christian teaching, to fail to see its relevance or the ways that it could be applied. Just so with Christ's prophecy about the fall of the great, grand temple in Jerusalem - so much more than a vision of a building's failure to remain standing. The temple, dedicated to God, represented the nature of the relationship between God and his people. It stood for a system and an order of things.

Consider if you will, but God forbid, someone prophesying about the destruction of the Houses of Parliament or the White House. That 'someone' would be saying something about the whole edifice of the institutions these buildings represent, not just something about the future relationship of their bricks and mortar.

Just so with Jesus' predictions of the various calamities from v.7 onwards. 'wars and rumours of wars', 'earthquakes' and 'famines'. These are not just the words of a toothless soothsayer predicting omens. Jesus, perfectly human and perfectly divine, observes that these are symptomatic of the ongoing struggle between good and evil, the struggle going on in each of us, as well as in the world. Christ's resurrection marks a revolution in the fortunes of that battle, his sacrifice is for all time and needs no repetition (Hebrews 10.11-12).

Make no mistake, when Jesus died for us, he died for us all. In doing so, he reset the clock according to the time of salvation and now sits at God's right hand - waiting. Waiting, as Bridget Nichols has said, 'until those for whom he died catch up' (Heb. 10.12-13). This is not a passive disengagement – waiting is dependent on relationship, imagined as a promise, a covenant, kept alive by the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10.15).

In this new covenant we find a way for our imperfect flesh to find its way to God – through the blood of Jesus that washes sin away, and the bread that is his flesh - to bring us home. And we can always, in the meantime, 'provoke one another to love and to good deeds' (Heb.10.24).

But the final victory over evil, wherever it rears its ugly head, or, put another way, the bringing to birth of that new creation, will, Jesus predicts, necessarily generate painful birth pangs (v.8). Not just for the world - the nations, cities and towns - but for each of us as we wrestle with situations and eventualities that tax our capacity for goodness, mercy

and compassion. That test our on-going personal efforts to become 'righteous' - the kind of people God wants us to be.

Spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Daniel 12.1-3 The Resurrection of the Dead

12 'At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.

²Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Hebrews 10.11-14,19-25

11 And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God', ¹³and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.' ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

19 Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to

provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Mark 13.1-8 The Temple Destruction Foretold

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' ²Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.