

“Not the end, the beginning”, a sermon based on Mark 13:1-8 and 1 Samuel 1:4-20 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 14 November 2021.

Mark chapter 13 sounds like what the people say who come from faith communities that go house to house. You see them coming up the path, you open the door and you know how what they will say. “The world is in bad shape – wars and rumours of wars, famines and disasters.” Then they ask the question: “are you concerned about this?” The aim is to recruit us.

Now we find there are groups using the pandemic to recruit us. “Are you unhappy about the pandemic, about mandating vaccinations, about people losing their jobs, about the government overriding your freedom to decide for yourself? Join our protest march!”

Wars and earthquakes and famines, nations against nations – they are always with us and we can imagine Mark is describing the reality of everyday life. In a way he is. But those who first heard these words would have known the specific events to which Mark was referring. Sure, they are generic apocalyptic words, but in Mark they have a specific context. Let’s explore.

In approaching the reading, I want to recognise that the text is in two time zones. There is the time of Jesus and his early followers around 30 AD. But there is another time zone - forty years later when the gospel was written down – about 69AD. We are going to spend time in the second time zone. I am drawing on the work of a New Testament scholar, Ched Myers. Note that we are coming to the end of a year given to the gospel of Mark. We have come to the end of Jesus’ public ministry and we are now in the period he goes underground towards the cross.

Mark tells this story in the context of a Jewish-Roman war when there was a revolutionary Jewish provisional government in Jerusalem. It came to power by way of a revolt launched in Jerusalem in June of 66AD and it quickly spread to the surrounding provinces. Naturally, the Romans were not happy. So in November 66, Cestus Gallus led Roman troops to march on Jerusalem to put down the insurrection. They occupied the northern part of the city but were turned back when they attacked the Temple mount. Stunned, they retreated in disarray. Jewish guerrillas pursued them to the coast and the Roman army sustained heavy losses. Gallus sent an urgent message to Rome for extra troops.

The Jerusalem rebels were euphoric. Palestine was liberated! Against all odds, outnumbered and out-armoured, the rebels had turned away the oppressors. Unfortunately, the provisional rebel government was mired in internal power struggles, bordering on civil war and that did not help their organising. The liberation was short-lived.

Vespasian the greatest general of the time and soon to become emperor was dispatched to shut down Palestine. He gathered legions from Egypt and Syria, and with 6000 heavily armed troops, began a march down through Galilee towards Jerusalem. Despite heroic resistance by scattered guerrilla forces, within a short time many regions were retaken by Vespasian. By June of 68, he was ready to begin his siege of Jerusalem. Once again, though, the unexpected occurred. He had to withdraw. Rome itself became locked in a fierce civil war. The emperor Nero had died and four candidates were vying to succeed him. So Vespasian had been urgently summoned back to Rome. He was one of the candidates. The Jewish resistance would get a reprieve of almost a year and a half. Surely, they thought, only Yahweh, only God could have worked not one but two miracles to save the holy city!

In the middle of this was an early Christian community, caught between a rock and a hard place. The Jewish revolutionary government and fighters on one side, and the Roman army on the other. Vespasian sent Titus to finish off the Palestinian rebels. Titus began his siege in April 70AD and after five months of pitched battle, Jerusalem fell. The city was sacked. The temple was burned to the ground.

Myers believes the gospel of Mark was written in 69AD in the period when the Jewish resistance had reason to believe Yahweh had intervened, twice, on their behalf. During this time, it seems the rebel supporters were going through Palestine calling on the faithful for the final battle. They would have used all the stories of how God rescued Israel in the past. They would have portrayed the war as a sure sign Israel was entering the messianic age when Israel would finally have a liberating leader. So the recruiters would be out on the streets, crying out – now is the time to fight. Now is the time to push away the Roman oppressor, once and for all.

While this was happening, what were the followers of Jesus meant to do? Which prompted Mark to write things down for the benefit of those followers. Mark wanted the members of his community to reject the claims of the rebel recruiters. But how was Mark to persuade them? Against the pull of patriotism. Against the promise that God would vindicate Israel. Against the call to save the beautiful and beloved Temple.

Mark sets out the vision of Jesus in utter conflict to the rebels. Jesus does not predict that God will intervene to save the Temple, but that it will be destroyed. This amazingly beautiful and substantial building made with enormous blocks of stone ... gone. This powerful and legitimating structure central to Jewish life ... gone. This icon of Israel that God protected from Roman oppression ... gone. Such news must have shaken them deeply. So they approached Jesus privately.

And Mark records Jesus saying - Beware that no one deceive you. Beware the false prophets. Mark is challenging the false myth of popular kingship and a final dramatic solution. The images he uses have specific references.

Rumours of wars – Was the siege coming? Were the Romans withdrawing?

Kingdom against kingdom – the wavering fortunes of Rome in 67 AD after the death of Nero, four contenders vying for power.

Natural disasters – the famine that hit Palestine in the early 50s, the earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that destroyed Laodicea and Pompeii in 61 and 62.

People knew what Mark was referring to. What Mark opposed was the idea that these events signalled the end time and that there would be a decisive victory. He uses a rare word that means to avoid precipitous action.

Mark says that these events are not the end, but the beginning, the beginning of a new way of living. He speaks of experiencing the pain of childbirth. Israel is going through a time of disturbance and pain for being reborn. Echoing the story of Hannah. This is not a time for revolutionary triumphalism stirred up by rebel recruiters. This is a time entering into a new way of living, for being birthed into a crucified, vulnerable and loving life.

Over recent months in our country, recruiters have used apocalyptic language, exaggerated imagery – we hear the use of words like fascism, communism, dictatorship, rebellion, and more serious threats. Mark seems very relevant. This is not a time for rebellion that proclaims instant liberation and a triumphant individualism.

This is a time for coming to terms with pandemics, and of living the crucified life, in love of neighbour. This is a time for finding a new way of living, new patterns of loving, new means of offering each other support, of building a new kind of community. Yes we can lament what is no more, but it is not the end. It is the beginning of something new, if we are prepared to work through it, labouring on, living the crucified life of love, abiding in the crucified one.

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