

14 November 2021

Mark 13. 1-11

Not one stone on top of another

[A sermon for the 7.30am Service only; at 9.30am, Bishop John Roundhill led a Confirmation Service. About 1,280 words.]

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**The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark,  
Chapter 13 beginning at verse 1  
*Glory to you Lord Jesus Christ.***

<sup>1</sup> As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” <sup>2</sup> Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

<sup>3</sup> When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, <sup>4</sup> “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” <sup>5</sup> Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. <sup>6</sup> Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. <sup>7</sup> When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. <sup>8</sup> For 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.

<sup>9</sup> “As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. <sup>10</sup> And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. <sup>11</sup> When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

**[NRSV Mark 13:1-11]**

This is the Gospel of the Lord,  
***Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.***

Do you remember where you were on September 11, 2001? I need not remind you that on that day, two hijacked passenger planes were intentionally crashed into the 110-storey Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City, resulting in the collapse of both buildings soon afterward. [Two other planes were also hijacked and crashed that same day, but my focus today is the two that were crashed into the WTC.] Not one stone was left upon another; all was thrown down. The unthinkable had happened.

Most of us can remember where we were at the time, even though we live thousands of miles away, and the images of that day will replay in our minds for the rest of our lives.

I was priest in a parish in Johannesburg and was on my way home at the end of the day to be with Julia and my twins who were 3 months' old that day. Just before I drove off, a friend phoned to tell me about it. I remember my sense of horror as I got home and watched the drama unfold, thinking "what have we done, bringing children into this world?"

Other disasters before and since then have had larger loss of life. But this one affected many of us dramatically because it seemed to change the world as we knew it, with disastrous wars that followed and conflicts that still continue, and because the tumbling of the Towers symbolised more than 110 storey buildings.

They symbolised our society's capacity to achieve whatever it wants to achieve, and the apparent supremacy of Western capitalism and democracy, and the ability always to defend ourselves against such attacks. Our world has seemed much less secure since then.

We are not the first people in history to experience such an earth-shattering attack, causing a huge change to our world-view. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 AD had a similar impact on the people of that era.

Jesus predicted it, but by the time Luke wrote his account of Jesus' words, it had already happened, so his Gospel gives us some sense of the way people were reacting. The Temple dominated the Jerusalem skyline just as the twin towers did in New York City.

Luke describes what must have been a common scene: people walking around in the temple, marvelling at its scale and its grandeur. For the people of Jerusalem, the temple was a source of enormous pride and was central to their identity. “We live in God’s own city, in sight of the Temple, the house of God. Surely nothing can ever destroy us, for God will let no harm come to his city and its inhabitants.”

But as the sightseers bask in the glory of the Temple, Jesus says, “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Unthinkable. Unimaginable. And yet, less than 40 years after Jesus said it, the Temple was brought down, and the city sacked by the Roman army. Dark and fearful times. The world seemed a lot less secure after that.

The towers and temples in which we put our trust, and which symbolise our identity and security are not always built of stone and concrete and steel.

For some, it will be a particular position on the career ladder. You’ve worked hard to get there. It means the world to you. If asked about yourself, one of the first things you do is to talk about your work. It defines you and gives you a sense of purpose and you know nothing much could go wrong. But a dreadful day comes when not one stone is left upon another; all is thrown down. The company goes bankrupt, everyone is out of work, or you are retrenched, or you get sick or injured and are unable to return to work, or COVID comes along and your work comes to an end. Your whole world collapses. Not one stone is left upon another; all is thrown down.

For others, it will be some sure hope for your future, perhaps a dream of being married and having children of your own, or dreams for your family, or dreams for your retirement.

But perhaps you find yourself single, or divorced, or unable to have children. Or you have children, but things don’t turn out for them as you’d hoped, or your retirement funds are swallowed in a scam.

For others it will be health that gives you the assurance that all is well. But one day the doctor says “Cancer!”, and it’s not one easily treated; or you are diagnosed with another illness for which there is no easy cure.

Jesus said: “As for these things that you see – these magnificent symbols of our success and accomplishment and security – the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” And they asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”

And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.”

Jesus hasn’t said there would be a sign, yet those who hear him assume that there must be a sign, a warning. But Jesus doesn’t offer them a sign. Instead he warns them that a preoccupation with warning signs could lead them astray. “Many will come claiming that they can read and interpret the signs. Don’t go after them.”

Jesus does not call us all to be foretellers of the future. He calls us to avoid falling for false prophets. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about being able to predict the future or read supernatural signs. The gospel is not about securing our world so that towers and temples never fall.

Rather, the gospel offers to empower us and gives us a context for our lives so that when the towers and temples do fall, even the ones we have erected for ourselves, we can endure and find a way out of the rubble and go on towards new life and new hope.

Jesus is quite clear that if we follow him, instead of being out of harm’s way, we may attract hostility and suspicion.

Towers and temples will fall. They have before and they will again. Many if not all of us have had some experience of this in our lives. The Good News is not protection against that.

The Good News is that towers and temples were not all they appeared to be, and that their falling is the invitation to find the life and hope that will endure even when all is thrown down. It is when the towers fall that we see most clearly that only God’s unshakeable love and towering compassion remain.

Though our world comes crashing down, we find ourselves falling into the loving hands of God, and if we can resist the temptation to quickly erect another tower, we can rest in those hands and find the life that really is life. Some of us have to learn that lesson several times, or we get caught up in the stampede to get another tower up to give us something to believe in.

Towers and temples will fall. Not one stone will be left upon another. But do not despair, do not be terrified. God's unshakeable love and towering compassion remain. Turn to that and live. Turn to that and know yourself beloved. Turn to that and gain your souls.

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PREFACE TO THE GREAT THANKSGIVING

The Lord be with you (usual words and responses, etc.)

It is indeed right to give you our thanks and praise, O God,
for you invite us to draw deeply from your well of salvation.

You created heaven and earth as the first of your works
and chose a people to be your delight.
Though we marred your creation
with war and insurrection,
you have given us a vision of a day beyond the terrors:
a day when the sound of weeping will give way to delight,
when all creation will live in peace
and people will long enjoy the fruits of their labours.

In your child, Jesus the Christ,
you have begun the re-creation of all things.
When he was betrayed by friends,
arrested, persecuted,
and put to death,
you raised him to new life
and through him, you strengthen us
so that we might not grow weary in doing what is right
but through endurance, gain our souls.

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... And so, with all the choirs of angels in heaven
we proclaim your glory and join in their unending hymn of praise:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might...
Heaven and earth are full of your glory
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest!

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