

“A Rough Start” – Mk 3:1-8 – Nov 19/06

I had a real chuckle when I re-read the start of today's reading from Mark's gospel. We take our scripture seriously, and we tend to treat the people in the scriptures with considerable reverence, giving full acknowledgment to the roles they played in the fulfilling of God's grace. But every now and then the author of a gospel gives us a tongue-in-cheek look at the human frailty of even the disciples, and that gives me both a point of contact with those people and a sense of closeness, because we share many of the same foibles.

What tickled me in this passage was the portrayal of the disciples as the ultimate in tourists, fresh from their small town, now visiting the big city for the first time, getting sunburned on the roofs of their mouths (from looking WAY up with their mouths wide open!). The expression quoted in scripture could have come from any school trip: “Look, teacher, what big stones and what large buildings!”. Truly amazing when you consider these are the people who for some considerable time, perhaps as long as three years, have been walking alongside, talking with and being taught by Jesus. They have been witnesses to miracle after miracle, where multitudes have been fed, the lame made to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the sinner to be redeemed. And yet here they are, going “Ooh!”, “Aah!” like any tourist from a tiny hamlet in the big city for the first time. Just for a moment they seem wonderfully human, just like any real people, just like you and me.

And Jesus, like any good teacher leading a group of children on tour, turns it into a learning experience, pointing out to them in graphic and dramatic terms that not one of those big stones would be left standing upon another, that even these big buildings were not invincible, that like any of the works of man's hand they would eventually crumble. The disciples had to be profoundly affected; they had just been impressed with what seems to have been their first encounter with the might of the temple architecture, and now their teacher had predicted that the whole thing would be utterly destroyed. We can only imagine how they must have asked each other the burning questions, “When?” “How?” “Why?” “What's he talking about?!”

But we don't have to imagine for long, because shortly afterward, sitting symbolically ‘opposite’ from the temple, several of the bolder disciples asked Jesus those questions, or at least “When?”, and “How will we know it's about to happen(what will be the signs)?” And this is where Jesus begins to describe the troubles about to beset them: false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes and famines. A simple question about how the temple will be destroyed, and here he goes talking as if the end of the world is about to happen!

These words of Jesus would echo loud and clear to the faithful of the early church, because for them the very things that Jesus had predicted seemed to be coming true. In the midst of wars and rumors of wars, the very stones of the temple were indeed thrown down. As the Romans, who had conquered with supreme military might that remote country at the end of the Mediterranean, in the hope that doing so would keep the heart of the empire back home safe and sound, began to tire of losing soldiers one after the other in the streets of those Middle East towns, they once again opened the doors to their technologically-superior armories and brought out the heavy weapons. The Romans retaliated in the year 70 against these guerilla tactics with Operation ‘Iron Fist’, or at least ‘Stone Finger’, and rolled out their F-XVI (that's Latin for F-16) catapults, and not having any smart bombs yet began to drop “dumb bombs” on the nest of terrorists and religious zealots who called it the temple. The results were predictable – the temple was destroyed for all time, with as Jesus had predicted, not one stone left upon another. Well – technically that total destruction hasn't happened completely yet, because there still are a few stones left upon others in the Wailing Wall. However, the other

predictable result, that the Empire would also crumble, happened as well, but we won't go into that today!

In the process of using their incredibly superior force to subdue the troublemakers in what we now call the Middle East, the Romans of course inflicted no end of collateral damage to innocent parties, including the peaceful members and adherents of the early Christian church. Raiding parties broke into houses to arrest people gathered together for such nefarious crimes as celebrating communion. People disappeared into the arms of the military in the middle of the night and were never seen or heard from again, although rumors continued to circulate that they were being held incommunicado on an island somewhere, in a place called Camp 10 (I'll let you translate that into the Latin!). It was a horribly fearful time for the Christians, and the words of Jesus about the troubles to come rang clearly in their minds.

It's been two thousand years since those days, and as my mother used to say, "the more things change the more they are the same!" Super-powerful nations still rise up against other nations and beat the tar out of them in the misguided hope that it will create peace at home, reporting with great sadness their own casualties but being blind to the carnage of innocents abroad. Kingdoms, including or especially financial kingdoms still fight other such kingdoms to the death, not caring who gets trampled in the process. False prophets abound on just about every radio and TV channel and website you can find, all dragging the unwary astray from the love of God into dens of hatred and spite, exclusivism and rejection. Drought, forest fires, floods, SARS, Mad Cows, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, asteroids, federal party nominations – there's no end to the signs of the end! It's no wonder we can become afraid and terrified as easily as those early people of faith did, and that we can hear these words of Jesus echo clearly.

It would be good if Jesus' words did ring clearly, because then we would hear also in them the tiny clue of God's incredible grace and mercy. "Do not be alarmed ...", Jesus said, "this is but the beginning of the birth pangs". "Don't be afraid", he said, "this is the start of something good." What an apt analogy for Jesus to use – birth. We all know that giving birth is hard work, painful, messy, and while much safer now than ever before still not without risk. Those who have gone through it, and those who have assisted, would both agree that an approaching birth, signaled by the onset of painful contractions, is a long and hard and challenging exercise. In Jesus' day it must have been even more so, with limited knowledge of what exactly was happening, and with even more limited tools available to counteract any problems that might arise. Birth was then, and continues to be, a somewhat scary process.

But at the same time there are few events that bring the same kind of elation, of sheer raw joy at the emergence of new life as does a birth. New life, hope for the future, another chance, growth, all of these are signaled as well by the birth pangs.

The new life to which Jesus referred was the new life secured in his death and resurrection, and there would be birth pangs aplenty – it would be a rough start. Jesus would within hours be betrayed by one of the ones sitting with him opposite the doomed temple, and his arrest, his trial, and his horrible execution on a cross would follow in agonizing hours. The pangs of grief at Jesus' death, and burial, were as acute as any grieving anywhere, anytime, because the death of this man who walked so closely with God, who had the power to heal the lepers, the blind, the deaf seemed to signal the end of a mystical and magical time. But they were just the pangs of the birth of a new covenant with God, for Jesus rose again victorious over even death itself, and a new era was born. "Fear not", he said, and now with this demonstration of his true oneness with God Jesus confirmed the foundation for his claim. By God's grace and mercy shown in his son Jesus Christ, wars, famines, earthquakes,

oppression, hatred, even death take a weak second place to the new life freely available through belief in Christ.

The people of the early church recognized that grace and mercy and new life, and continued to proclaim it until even as that Empire – and many more that would come and go – crumbled. The church continued to proclaim the victory of God's grace in Christ over wars, famine, earthquakes and all other disasters throughout the history of the rise and fall of countless Empires, and continues to do so today.

Note that the proclamation is victory over these calamities, not isolation from them. It's confusing to note how so much of the church today proclaims a gospel that with enough belief in Jesus, life will be perfect, and people of sufficient piety will not be touched by the disasters that swirl around. It's confusing because it's difficult to reconcile that kind of proclamation with the words of Jesus, as he tells his followers that they will be suffer all kinds of oppression and pain, some of it because of their faith, but that he will be with them, and the Holy Spirit will give them not only the words to say, but strength to endure. His promise to them, and thus his promise to us, was secured in his own death and resurrection, and we, like all the saints before us are privileged to proclaim that same promise.

Life will bring challenges, suffering, hardship, and pain. We can, especially as we approach our own death, almost certainly expect it to get worse before it gets better. But in the midst of those troubles, we need to hear these words from Jesus, who has walked the whole course before us, and I mean the whole course, including death. We need to hear the tiny but oh-so-significant words of assurance from the one who has promised to walk with us through our troubles that this is only the beginning, the beginning ultimately of something totally wonderful, namely entry into the presence of God, blameless and sinless through the grace and mercy of God in Christ Jesus his son, for whom we give all thanks and praise.