

“Do Not Be Alarmed” – Mk 3:1-8 – Nov 15/09

Have you been to see the latest “end of the world” movie? I haven’t, even though my brother-in-law worked on it. That particular movie predicts the end of the world in 2012, apparently based on a Mayan calendar, although I did read in the paper that contrary to the movie’s thesis the Mayan calendar does actually extend beyond that year. It seems that every time we have a dip in the economy another round of “end of the world” movies hit the big screen – was it not in the 30’s that Orson Well’s famous “War of the Worlds” panicked an entire nation? In any event, here we have in Mark’s gospel a similar kind of scary prediction, and like many of the movies there is also a humorous aspect to it.

That glimpse of humour occurs in the opening scene with a portrayal of the disciples as the ultimate tourists, fresh from their small town, now visiting the big city for the first time, gaping with mouths wide open as they admire the Temple. The expression quoted in scripture could have come from any school trip: “Look, teacher, what big stones and what large buildings!”. Their amazement at this building is curious when you consider these are the people who while walking with Jesus for some three years have witnessed miracle after miracle. They have been present when multitudes were fed, the lame walked, the blind could see and the deaf could hear, and sinners were 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.

But Jesus spoiled their moment of awe, 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 have just been terribly impressed with the might of the temple architecture, and now their teacher gives them the terrible prediction that the whole thing would be utterly destroyed. Can you imagine how they must have asked each other the burning questions, “When?” “How?” “Why?” “What’s he talking about?!”

We don’t have Jesus’ answers to all of their questions, but he did begin 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! The disciples were quickly moved from awe to angst.

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. The Romans had with advanced military technology had occupied a 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 (do we ever learn?!) Eventually they began to tire of losing soldiers one after the other in the streets of those Middle East towns and brought in yet another surge of troops. The local religious zealots not only continued their guerilla attacks but escalated them, and so finally the Romans retaliated in the year 70 by destroying 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 were scooped up by 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 a tropical island. 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 and beat the snot out of tiny nations in the misguided hope that it will ensure peace at home, reporting with great sadness their own casualties but being blind to the carnage inflicted upon innocents abroad. Financial kingdoms still fight each other to the death, not caring whose lives get ruined in the process. False prophets abound on just about every radio and TV channel and website you can find, spewing hatred and spite, racism and rejection, often smarmily disguised as patriotism and faith. Drought, forest fires, floods, Mad Cows, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, asteroids, Canadian federal politics, and now H1N1 pandemics – there's no end to the signs of the end! It's no wonder people become afraid and terrified as easily as those early people of faith did.

We hear Jesus' words about troubles to come and they resonate with our own fears, but it would be wonderful if we could hear also his prediction 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 a surprising yet apt analogy for Jesus to use – birth. We 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. Do you know that the term 'caesarian' comes from the technique invented to give birth to one of the Caesars? 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, the sheer raw joy at the emergence of new life as does a birth. New life, new 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 we continue to make that same proclamation today – "do not be alarmed" – Christ will be with us, and give us the victory.

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 just enough belief in Jesus life will be perfect, people who believe strongly enough and purely enough will not be touched by the disasters that swirl around. It's confusing because that's not what Jesus said, as he tells his followers that they will suffer all kinds of oppression and pain, some of it even 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 claim 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 do not be alarmed in the midst of those troubles; hear these words from Jesus, who has walked the whole course before us, and I mean the whole course, including death. 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.