

A Little Apocalypse (Mark 13. 1-11)

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Chapters 1 to 8 of Mark's gospel occur in and around Galilee, in what's now northern Israel. In Chapters 8 to 10, Jesus and his disciples are depicted as constantly travelling: 'discipleship is learned "on the way"'. Chapters 11 to 16, the final section of the gospel, occur in and around the city of Jerusalem, and particularly its Temple precinct. Biblical scholar Bonnie Thurston remarks that this sequence represents 'a great Markan irony'. For most Jews in first-century Palestine, the Temple in Jerusalem was the place you went pre-eminently to meet with God. Conventionally speaking, then, this narrative trajectory looks as though it depicts the movement of Jesus and his disciples *towards* the holiest place in the land. But by this stage in the gospel story, it's become clear that, for Jesus, Jerusalem signifies 'a place of religious corruption' rather than holiness, a place of 'personal rejection and death'.¹ The religious authorities have been unable to recognise that he's come from God. And so in today's passage Jesus enacts his final separation from the Temple cult. Mark expresses it with characteristic economy, saying: 'he came out of the temple'. He left the building.

Theologically, various things can be drawn from this. One scholar says the gospel is concerned to relocate believers' devotional focus 'from the temple as a place to prayer as a practice'.² This may seem relatively uncontroversial to us, but it must have been a big deal in Jesus' day. For although the temple he knew – the Second Temple – wasn't nearly as large or splendid as Solomon's it had recently been refurbished by Herod the Great and was the centre of Jerusalem's life. Like Mark, the Jewish historian Josephus mentions 'the mammoth size of [its] stones, reporting they

¹ Bonnie Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2002), p.122.

² Sharyn Dowd cited in Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, p.123.

were white and thirty-seven feet long, twelve feet high, and eighteen feet wide'.³ 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings'. But Jesus is unimpressed. 'Do you see these great buildings?', he asks. 'Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down' (Mark 13: 1-2).

As a matter of historical fact, this was true. The Temple would be destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, around the time the gospel of Mark was being written. Spiritually speaking, Jesus' words resonate with his general insistence that his disciples not be too attached to established religious forms. Though he never preaches 'systematic disregard'⁴ for the law of Israel, Jesus was clearly concerned that Temple worship and conventions like Sabbath observance and the purity codes had been co-opted to serve the ends of those in power. Rather than making visible the character of God and enabling human connection with God, he sees these practices functioning to block access and burden those least able to bear the cost. He quotes the prophets: 'Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice'. Again and again, Jesus points to the God who will not be contained or controlled by religious language, rituals or buildings.

This might suggest the promised destruction of the Temple is, for Jesus, an act of God, a judgement on the ungodly. The disciples certainly seem to hear his words this way: 'Tell us, when will this be, and when will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' At first glance, Jesus seems to reply within this same framework of violent apocalypse. He catalogues a whole series of disasters about to befall: 'wars and rumours of wars', nation rising against nation, earthquakes and famines. And yet – strikingly – he warns his disciples not to make any of this mean too much. Don't be alarmed, he says, and don't think these catastrophes are signs of some imminent end. As Jean-Pierre Dupuy puts it, 'Jesus refuses to let himself be

³ Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, p.145.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.17.

carried away by millenarian fervour'. He not only desacralizes the Temple, but also the event of its destruction, 'denying that this moment has any divine significance'.⁵

According to James Alison, the import of Jesus' teaching here is twofold.⁶ To begin, he's decoupling our image of God from violence and mayhem. He's subverting our tendency to attribute divine meaning to disaster and so to become morbidly fascinated by it. In this passage, Jesus describes events that likely refer to the fall of Jerusalem, which was a terrible thing for those who suffered it. 'But not even that, for all its horror, is to be read in a theological key',⁷ for Jesus insists 'if anyone says to you at that time, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "Look! There he is!" – do not believe it' (Mark 13:21). Alison writes: The disciples must 'learn to distance themselves from attributing theological importance to the violent events of this world. They have no such importance'.⁸ It follows, then, that what Jesus really cares about is teaching his disciples how to dwell amidst the violent cataclysms of history, and how to keep faith with the much slower work of transformation being wrought in our world by the love of God.

These are all themes we've touched on before at Benedictus, but they seem worth revisiting at this historical moment. For we too, it seems, live in a time of collapsing Temples and tottering institutions, of unbridled warfare and manifest disorder in the natural world. In the chaos and confusion of this time, there are those (on both the 'right' and 'left' of politics) who seem determined to hasten the demolition of structures we've built, in the name of bringing about some definitive shift in the world's affairs. Others are convicted of the need to defend and maintain these structures, seeing them (despite their limitations) as our only real bulwark against chaos, tyranny and the war of all against all. Some purport to see in the triumph of certain nations and individuals the hand of God acting directly to

⁵ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M.B. Debevoise (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p.31.

⁶ See Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996).

⁷ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.146.

⁸ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.145.

consummate divine purpose, while others insist these are false prophets, false messiahs whose only interest is themselves.

Our passage from Mark is known as 'The Little Apocalypse'. And if our times feel a little apocalyptic, then I wonder what wisdom we might glean from it? If it's true that Jesus instruct his disciples that what matters most in times of tribulation is not the sound and fury, but our capacity to continue to recognise and participate in the deeper dynamics of creation and reconciliation, then what might this suggest, practically, about how to live in such times? Let me offer three words.

First – risk. Jesus does not pretend that living in alignment with the work and will of God in violent times will be risk-free. Indeed, quite the opposite. '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'. It may be even worse than that: 'Brother will betray brother to death ... and you will be hated by all because of my name'. Mark is writing to a Christian community facing persecution on account of the gospel; but it's not hard to recognise the same risk being run by officials and military officers who may be called to stand against the abuse of executive power in the US, and by whistleblowers, dissidents, journalists and peacemakers the world over who – as well as facing the violence of those in power – may also suffer the rejection of their families and friends, and all the agony of doubt that entails. For in times of chaos and collapse, knowing what to remain true to, exactly when and how to resist, when and how to let things be destroyed, can be agonisingly unclear.

And this brings me to my second word: discernment. To remain true to the slow action of love in a troubled world requires the capacity to listen deeper. Jesus speaks of listening for the prompting of the Holy Spirit. '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)'. This deepened listening is much more open textured than adopting some pre-packaged stance of either the left or the right, letting the rules of my tribe determine

and justify my choices. If we're truly seeking to discern the way of God, then that's risky too. We're doing our best to sift the possibilities before us and be responsible. But such discernment does not necessarily culminate in the assurance of our righteousness. Again and again, we must come back to the ground of listening, be open, humble, attentive and exposed.

Which leads to my final word. Endurance. Jesus says 'the one who endures to the end will be saved'. The Greek word is '*hupomeno*' and it means 'steadfastness under trial and opposition'. It has connotations of patience and of waiting, but it's no passive stoicism. It's more an active, hopeful, expectant waiting on God. *Hupomeno* is about actively orienting ourselves to the good, and persevering in the face of violence and uncertainty, suffering and injustice. It's about keeping faith with the ever-present possibility of transformation.

Wherever we face a little apocalypse – whether in our families and our workplaces, or in the breakdown of social and political structures – discipleship means being there in the midst as Christ is in our midst. In Jesus, God has entered time and wills to liberate and heal. Look out for *that* reality, be ready to participate in it.