

Pentecost 25 – Wesley 9am and 10.30am – 18th November 2012

Theme: “Signs of the end of the age – yet called to persevere”

Readings: Mark 13:1-8 and Hebrews 10:11-14 & 19-25

Introduction

We are almost at the end of the Christian calendar year that ends next Sunday with Christ the King as the theme. This leads into the season of Advent, those four Sundays that prepare us for Christmas. We only have to walk around the shops to realise that Christmas is coming! But here in our readings, for the completion of the Church Year, are difficult passages that talk of the end of the age, particularly the Mark 13 reading.

We know that towering buildings are not supposed to crumble to the ground. Oceans are not supposed to leap out of their seabeds and flood miles inland wreaking havoc in their path. The sky is not meant to cause cyclones that destroy so much in their wake. Yet such events happen and people lose loved ones, property and livelihoods. People lose their innocence as they see structures and oceans and storms alter what they previously had thought were indestructible or would remain the same forever.

All of us have seen such cases on our televisions and some have witnessed such devastation personally. Locally for us in Canberra there have been the fires of a decade ago along with the Thredbo disaster. If you were involved in these events, or others, those memories live on! For me the fires of Ash Wednesday along with Thredbo are foremost in my thoughts as I was involved in both of these events as a chaplain.

Mark 13: 1-8

However, in the Gospel for today we have the account of the disciples remarking on the size and the beauty of the Temple in Jerusalem.

William Placher in his commentary on Mark says the Temple ‘occupied a platform of over 300 metres by 500 metres and the front of the temple stood 50 metres tall and 50 metres wide, made of white stone, much of it covered with silver and gold, by far the most impressive building any of the disciples had seen, as it glowed in the sunlight.’ (pp184/5) We can quite understand the disciples comments – what a great building. Jesus’ retort to them must have thrown them completely.

‘Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.’ (verse 2)

Unimaginable as the disciples looked at these buildings but it came to be, to a large extent, with the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 AD as the Jewish people tried to rise up against their Roman overlords who then destroyed their central place of worship. Jesus goes on to warn the disciples about those falsely claiming to be the promised messiah and of the wars and natural disasters that will occur. He says these are ‘the beginning of birth pangs’ which was understood to mean that these precede the coming again of the Messiah at the end of the age. This of course has led to many claiming that different disasters and world situations are a prelude to the coming of Jesus again. Some groups have predicted the end of the world, as we know it, on a given date.

The one that sticks in my mind, while not remembering the actual date, shows my South Australian origins. There was a group in the days when Don Dunstan was Premier of South Australia in the mid 1970’s that predicted a tsunami that would come and wash Adelaide away. At the designated hour Don Dunstan was on the beach at Glenelg pictured with a drink in his hand as he reclined on the beach.

There were those who politically had wished for a small tsunami that day that washed him out to sea but unfortunately it didn't eventuate!

What these future Christians had failed to read properly were the verses further on in this passage, and not part of today's reading, which say: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come." Mark 13:32/33

What Jesus also says to the disciples is to:

1. Screen your leaders so that you don't have false prophets that lead you astray.
2. There is the call to remain calm in the unsettling events to come.
3. There is a call to be prepared in our faith, for whatever may happen. No easy task, but there is this call to be on guard and ready.

Hebrews 10: 11-14 & 19-25

The passage from Hebrews in a sense builds on the Gospel.

This is part of a pastoral letter to Jewish converts to Christianity.

It pre-supposes an understanding of the Hebrew/Old Testament customs and beliefs which makes the passage a little difficult for us today.

1. Firstly, there is the concept that by the sacrificial blood of Christ our sins are forgiven. This comes out in verse 14 where we read, "...by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." Jesus's sacrificial death has atoned for all our sins of all time, making any further sacrifice unnecessary.
2. Secondly, when Jesus died we read that the curtain in the temple which separated the Holy of Holies (the inner sanctum) from where the people gather was ripped in two. This was symbolic of opening up the relationship between God and the people through the sacrificial death of Jesus. This is in verses 19-21.

Then follows four conditions in 'drawing near to our God' in verse 22 of Hebrews 10.

1. We need a 'sincere heart' – not simply an assent but undivided allegiance to God through Christ.
2. We are called to have 'full assurance of faith' – this is a faith that that knows no hesitation in trusting and following Christ.
3. We are called to 'have hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience' – this means total freedom from a sense of guilt based on the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ.
4. We are called 'to have our bodies washed with pure water'. This is a symbol of inner cleansing . Baptism is a sign of taking on the beginnings of that cleansing with an external sign of the water washing sins away. But here is an acceptance of faith that cleanses internally as we accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

Then the writer implores the people to persevere with their faith, continue to meet together and to encourage one another in their faith. The why of this comes at the end of verse 25 in the words 'as you see the Day approaching'. 'The Day' refers to the Lord's return at the Parusia, the end time, and links back to the Gospel for today.

However, the teaching from both the Gospel and the Hebrews letter is to have our spiritual lives in order.

As we come to the close of the Christian calendar year, this is the clear message – get our spiritual lives in order and encourage one another in faith. This is the word of the Lord for us today. Amen.