



25th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 14 November 2021

READINGS

1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

Following the living God

Throughout history, as humanity grapples with immanent change, we often hear this aspirational sentiment: “the old world is passing away – something new is emerging” - Even though we may not know what that new thing is! When we speak in this way, we are speaking what is theologically and biblically referred to as apocalyptic language.

Our Gospel passage appointed for this Sunday is one such example of apocalyptic writing. The word apocalypse means an unveiling or uncovering of what was previously unknown or hidden. Apocalyptic literature is often characterized by bizarre visions and the use of strange symbolism. In biblical times, apocalyptic writing often emerged especially when people were in desperate situations, in times of persecution or when their faith was under attack or in danger of being abandoned. Because it's written in times of persecution, apocalyptic writing often uses symbolic speech that makes it difficult for those outside the situation to understand its meaning. But it is always and often, written to give hope to its readers. It's written to keep people's eyes focused on God and God's actions in history and to give assurance that, despite the apparent absence of God during trying times, God is still God. God still reigns and that the future of humanity and the entire created order belongs to God.

As the Gospel of Mark describes the scene, Jesus is standing in the temple courtyard with his disciples. Dazzled by the majestic architecture of the temple, one of the disciples asks Jesus to notice something: “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” According to 1st century historians, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus's day was an awe-inspiring wonder. Newly reconstructed by Herod the Great, the temple's retaining walls were composed of very large stones. The temple was adorned with so much gold to cover the outside walls that, apparently anyone who looked at them in bright sunlight would be so dazzled by their shine.

As you can imagine, the disciple in the Gospel story is impressed, and tries to share his sense of awe with Jesus. But Jesus isn't impressed. Instead, he responds to the disciple's remark with a question: “Do you see these great buildings?” “Not one stone will be left here upon another,” Jesus tells the stunned disciple. “All will be thrown down.” What the disciple sees is an architectural marvel, a thing of beauty – the biggest, boldest, and most unshakeable symbol of God's presence he can ever imagine. What takes the disciple's breath away as he gazes at the temple is the religious certainty and a sense of permanence that those glittering stones displayed to the world. But what does Jesus see? He sees ruins, destruction, loss and change as we later come to learn that that both the majestic temple and the city of

Jerusalem were destroyed by the Roman army in the year 70 CE. A portion of the Temple wall, known today as the Western Wall or Wailing Wall is still there today. But are these words of Jesus simply about a historical occurrence – something that was futuristic for his Gospel hearers and now a historical past for us?

Perhaps the purpose here in Mark's Gospel is not just to speak about the Temple. The point of the text is to reveal that the old world is passing away. Perhaps the point of Jesus' words and the prophecy is to show the reality that this is the new age of God and this is an age that is to be marked by faithfulness and following the living God and Jesus Christ.

In this sense, what Jesus offers his disciples is an apocalyptic vision. He invites them to look beyond the greatness of the temple, and recognize that God will not be confined to its glorious appearance of mortar and stone. God exceeds every establishment, every institution and every symbol that we human beings create in God's name. Jesus warns his disciples and speaks to us as well: be careful because human beings will always build new temples and new religions and new teachings. People will come and they will be false prophets and false leaders. When human beings get uncomfortable, we easily follow instead of leading. We look for teachers and prophets who will lie to us and tell us that everything is ok and that God is predictable and will do this and that for us.

Christians have always lived in between the earth which is falling away and the heaven which is not yet fully revealed - in a Kairos moment. We live in a time which calls not for hiding away but rather for being the shelter in the storm for those in the world who are gripped by fear. We are the ones, like Jesus, to see the changing times and the seasons, This God we worship has a plan and the plans of men are falling in the wake of its eternal progression.

We are as a Christian people invited to cling to Jesus and his love and to counteract the seasons of change, not by clinging to the temple which is crumbling, or by following every trend that promises a return to a golden age - but rather rely on the calm strength and generous love of God in the face of calamity or stress.

Don't give in to terror. Don't despair. Don't capitalize on chaos. God is not where people often say God is – It is precisely at times like these, when the world around us feels the most catastrophic, that we have to respond with resilient, healing love. It's precisely now, when systemic evil and age old brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we have to make peace, choose hope, cultivate patience throughout the changing seasons of our lives even as the world reels and tries to cling to that which is comfortable and familiar and appears to be permanent. Our God calls us to embrace a journey of faith that includes failure, destruction and finally rebirth.