

Sermon: Sunday 18 November 2018 – 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
St John the Evangelist Toorak  
1 Samuel 1:4-20; Song of Hannah; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-11

Each generation has its predictors of “the end”.

Each generation can see the various ways that the world as we know it might come to an end.

And there are always those who can't imagine that grand human endeavours might fall.

In our Gospel episode today, Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem. They have been inside what is known as the Second Temple, the Jewish place of worship that is thought to have replaced the First Temple built by King Solomon.

As they walk around the building, they are rightly impressed by the scale of human achievement.

When I was in Jerusalem earlier this year, I and other pilgrims stood on the Mount of Olives and looked to Jerusalem. The Temple that Jesus and his disciples saw is long gone. All that survives of that Temple is the base of the Western Wall also called the Wailing Wall, a site of deep significance for Jewish people today.

Jerusalem is still an impressive sight.

The most striking element of the modern skyline is the golden dome of the Temple Mount, a place of deep significance for Muslim people today.

There are also shining church spires and skyscrapers outside the walls of the old city, a physical sign of the significance of this place for the Christian faith and modern political considerations.

When the disciples express this sense of awe inspired by the great buildings, Jesus counters it with a prediction that the buildings will fall and that other disasters and troubles will arise.

In the interests of full disclosure, it should be acknowledged that by the time the Gospel of Mark was being written down from oral traditions, the Temple had most likely already been destroyed by the Romans. This was the Empire's reaction to ongoing Jewish revolts of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

Nothing built with human hands lasts forever.

Jesus warns his disciples not to be led astray during times of turmoil. This is not the most hope-filled passage in the Gospels, and demonstrates how important it is to take the Gospel message as a whole and not get too focussed on individual passages to suit our human agendas.

Jesus said, “Beware that no-one leads you astray”.

Put five Biblical scholars in a room and you will probably get at least six different views on any particular topic you choose to raise, especially those questions that 21<sup>st</sup> century people ask that are not directly addressed in these nearly 2000 year old accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who is Jesus Christ, God’s Son, the Messiah.

As Christians we do rightly look to the Bible for guidance on how we live and what we believe, with the teachings of Jesus as our starting point and lens. Our understanding should continue to be inspired by the Holy Spirit as the human race learns more and more about our world through ongoing reflections and discoveries in, philosophy, scientific exploration, and even theology.

Collective understandings can shift over time, and that might be part of God’s ongoing relationship with human beings.

As one example, slavery is assumed as fact in the Bible, just a part of the way the world works. Later, Christians and others challenged that presumption and campaigned to abolish slavery that was a global business.

The hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ was written by a former slave trader. John Newton captained slave trading ships before taking an office job. As he explored the Bible and his faith further, he regretted his part in a trade that now disgusted him.

He became an Anglican priest and helped those such as William Wilberforce who campaigned to abolish the slave trade.

‘Amazing Grace’ is John Newton’s own experience of receiving God’s grace, salvation and revelation. It has an enduring appeal and speaks to the fact that people can change their world view.

How do we know if we are being led astray?

If different people of deep faith hold divergent views on contemporary topics, how do we know which way to go?

This is something that the Anglican church worldwide is struggling with at the moment.

The phrase “Bible-believing Anglican” or “Faithful Anglican” are phrases used to self-describe those who disagree and struggle with Biblical interpretations that take into account modern understandings of science, medicine, psychology and psychiatry and other fields of study. There are those who believe many Christians are now in error, and they believe they have it right and are the keepers of the true interpretation of Scripture.

The current battleground appears to be human sexuality and in our Australian and New Zealand context, changes to secular legal structures that allow marriage equality become the focus of broader debates about Biblical interpretation. By laying claim to the titles “Bible-believing” and “Faithful Anglican” the clear accusation is that if you don’t agree, you have somehow abandoned God’s Word.

At Synod recently, a gathering of ordained and lay Anglicans from across Melbourne, the matter of ‘Gay Conversion Therapy’ was discussed. You can read reports about the debates at Synod in this month’s Melbourne Anglican newspaper.

A priest moved a motion that this gathering condemn the practice in light of the overwhelming evidence that it causes significant harm to people’s mental and spiritual wellbeing.

During the debate, I was struck by how many of my fellow Christians couldn’t even bring themselves to say the word gay, as if by doing so they would have to acknowledge it as a reality, rather than continue in their belief that any human sexuality that isn’t heterosexual is unnatural. This is in the face of experts, Christians among them, that now understand that a person’s sexual identity is an intrinsic part of who they are. It is reality.

Any truly diverse community will have differing opinions on many topics. As the church, we are called to welcome everyone, so diversity is part of the deal as we wrestle with what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ.

So how do we know if we are being led astray?

How do we live as Christians?

It isn't easy. It's not meant to be easy. It will take grappling, discussion, debate, but all of that needs to happen in a spirit of respect, inclusion and the belief that we are all made in God's image, we are all loved as children of God and we are all equal members in God's Kingdom.

We are called as Christians to exercise our free will and do what we believe is right. We may never know if our choices were correct, but we do the best we can with all the information available and revealed to us. We make a choice.

As those who are baptised (or who bring children to be baptised) make a choice to turn to Christ, to repent of sin and commit themselves to living their life in the light of Christ and dedicated to God, Christians continue to take the Gospel message as a whole to the world and keep our perspective on the bigger picture, God's eternal vision as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. A message of hope that speaks to every generation.

We are committed to entering into the longer term vision of God who sent Jesus into the world, who reached out to the marginalised and outcast, who looked on the grandeur of the Temple and saw its temporary nature, who brought the message of God's love and grace for people from all kinds of backgrounds and who started a movement that spread around the world, that spoke into every race and language, and that continues to offer hope.

To be honest, I'm not sure what those of us living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Melbourne can best do with the apocalyptic imagery we find in the Bible, but at the very least it is a reminder that the message of hope will be challenged and needs work, our work, to be protected and shared.

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