

Sunday between 13th and 19th November [33]

Mark 13:1-11

As we near the end of the long season in the church of the Sundays after Pentecost or Ordinary Time as it is sometimes called, the readings also begin to show signs of the end-game. Our news cycles can also seem to be reflected in the apocalyptic writings of scripture as we turn to news outlets daily to be reminded that all is not well in some parts of the world and indeed in some parts of our country, state and locality.

To begin with in today's readings, we are met with hope. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, is in deep despair but her faith, unrelenting and unfailing faith, is recognised and remembered and she receives the gift of a child, the one she had prayed for fervently. In Samuel, the hope of faith was fulfilled, but it came after much time had passed and much pain had been experienced. Hannah had lived with much sadness, it was far from all plain sailing to be a woman of faith for her.

The writer of the letter to Hebrews is reassuring, as you would expect from someone speaking as a Christian in the new understanding of the covenant relationship we now have with God through Jesus. We need not concern ourselves with being righteous enough as Jesus made us to be in relationship with God not by anything we did, but by everything that he did. By his death and resurrection we are free from the constraints of our sins are free to approach God just as we are.

But what does Jesus say, he is after all the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, everyone else's opinion pales into insignificance behind his? Jesus speaks today of end times. He makes his prediction that the temple would be destroyed which came to pass around AD 80 although he would not be drawn on times and dates. He goes on to tell of coming wars and natural disasters which again have no dates or times. Jesus gives us no information to help us avoid these things, no strategies to fight back against them, in fact he says they must happen, but he doesn't say why or how. But what he does say is that we need to take care not to be deceived, we need to stick fervently to our faith in Jesus no matter what we see or experience, our hope is in him. And he warns that we will be held to account for our faith, we know that sisters and brothers in parts of our world are truly facing that reality now, but Jesus said we need not worry about what we will say, the Holy Spirit will give us the words, and by the inspiring stories of defiance we have seen through history and more recently that is exactly what is happening.

So how will we not be deceived, how will we stick fervently to our faith? First we will pray. It is how we allow God in and ourselves to be inspired, it is where our thoughts and understanding will best come together, in deep and focussed prayer and isn't Hannah the most perfect example of what that can do? Find time this week to pray, however best works for you, but do it intentionally and with a listening ear.

Second we act on our prayers, Fred Rodgers, a veteran US children's broadcaster and journalist is quoted as offering this advice to children dealing with trauma or the news of disaster he says, "I was spared from any great disasters when I was little, but there was plenty of news of them in newspapers and on the radio, and there were graphic images of them in newsreels. For me, as for all children, the world could have come to seem a scary place to live. But I felt secure with my parents, and they let me

know that we were safely together whenever I showed concern about accounts of alarming events in the world. There was something else my mother did that I've always remembered: "Always look for the helpers," she'd tell me. "There's always someone who is trying to help." I did, and I came to see that the world is full of doctors and nurses, police and firemen, volunteers, neighbours and friends who are ready to jump in to help when things go wrong."

Third we don't make things worse. The down side of social media is that instantly messages can zip around the world and with little or no factual basis. It is very easy to see an inspiring picture or quote or a warning type of post online and share it widely amongst our friends. In this way, information can spread internationally in hours, yet sometimes the information is untrue and unhelpful in the circumstances. We need to be careful what we say and what we share so that information is correct and not scaremongering.

Finally, we remember Jesus' commandment of love. It would be so easy to hate now, in a world where there are so many ways to divide ourselves up and faction off into groups by race, religion, age, status, wealth and any number of other markers. It is not easy to love our enemy, but first we need to be sure we accurately establish our enemy, and it's not every refugee, or every member of another religion, or every person from a sub-section of the community, although some will try to deceive us that it is, but even when we find that enemy, we still need to love them. Not to let people who have sinned to get away with what they may have done, not to suggest it was nothing to worry about, any involved with destructive or criminal activity, must be brought to justice, there is no peace without justice.

But we love our enemies and those who hate us in so much as we want them to see what they have done, to change their view of the world, to value humanity, to value themselves as more than the harm they do. When we experience the love of God in our lives it transforms us, it makes us better than we were, we love our enemies in the hope that they too can come to experience that life transforming love. It doesn't make sense to the world but the world hasn't experienced what we have, it is the Christian way because we know what love can do.

Let us leave the last word to Martin Luther King, who was much better at this sort of thing than most of us, he said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."