

ADDRESS

18 November 2018

26th Sunday after Pentecost

1 Samuel 1. 4-20	Hannah conceives
Song of Hannah	Hannah rejoices
Hebrews 10. 11-14, 19-25	Hold fast to the faith
Mark 13.1-11	The end of the age

For most of the last century, the century most of us were born in, perhaps the world's most read, and translated, and discussed living scholar was Arnold Toynbee, the British historian. His 12-volume *Study of History* took 24 years to write, and almost as long to read, but the authorised condensation sold more than half a million copies.

Toynbee argued that the history of humankind was the story of the rise and fall of 26 great civilizations, 26 great ages. Each civilisation had begun with a creative, powerful leader, a man with a vision and a mission. Each civilisation had declined and fallen when the original great vision was lost. The last of these 26 civilisations is our own, which Toynbee argued is showing all the signs of disintegration, to quote, *stiffening by imperceptible degrees into the paralysis of life-in-death*.

Thoughts to chew over with our Sunday roast!

Today's gospel reading is the last of our readings from Mark this year, and it records Jesus' prophecy of the end of the age for his own people: the end of the temple, the end of the Jewish nation, a nation which had survived for more than 1 400 years in one form and another, since Joshua had led the people of Israel into the Promised Land.

By the time the gospels were compiled Jesus' prophecy had been fulfilled – Jerusalem had been destroyed, the temple was in ruins, and more than a million of its people had been killed, either in the battle or from starvation, because the Roman siege had lasted more than five months. The Jewish historian Josephus, who was with the Roman army as a translator, gives us all the horrific details. If you like horror stories, you can read this one on the web.

After the city fell, Titus gave orders that all the buildings in the city were to be destroyed, pushed over stone by stone, and the foundations dug up. *Not one stone will be left here on another*, Jesus had said. Only one or two buildings survived, ones that could be used to house a Roman garrison.

No wonder that all three Synoptic gospels record Jesus' grim prophecy; no wonder that the disciples saw the end of their age as the end of time, as if theirs was to be the last of the great

civilisations: *Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?*

Jesus responds by warning them, in effect, not to confuse the end of the age with the end of time. *Do not be alarmed, the end is still to come.* The parallel passage in the gospel of Matthew makes the message even more clear: *Jesus said, This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout all the world, as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.* (Mt 24.14)

In Jesus' time, in Palestine, there was a lot of speculation about the end of the world, when it would come, and what would happen. How devastating would it be? One pious group, the Essenes, even left Jerusalem, after more than a century living in and around the temple, they left to live in the desert near the Dead Sea, because they, too, confused the end of the age with the end of the world, and wanted to be ready when it happened.

The Essenes' writings which have survived in the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls say that, at the end of the world, at least two Messiahs, maybe three, will come to save God's people. The Messiah of David, a kingly figure who would come to lead the war against God's enemies. The Messiah of Aaron, a priestly figure, who would come to restore the Temple at Jerusalem to its original purity. Some of the scrolls speak of a third Messiah, a prophet figure, who would lead God's people into all truth.

We know these three as the one Messiah, whom we honour as prophet, and priest and king.

Today's reading ends at verse 11. The chapter continues with Jesus' teachings about what will happen at the end of time, after the end of the age – there will be more suffering, there will be signs and omens in the heavens, as the prophet Isaiah had predicted centuries before (Is. Ch. 13). Then, praise be to God, those alive at the time *will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.* (v. 26).

Over the centuries, people have speculated about when the end of the world will come, and what will happen; in particular, what will happen to them. As we will hear next week, the book of the Revelation tells us that *the time is near, these things must soon take place.* Near in God's time. The Revelation speaks of a period of a thousand years. So, towards the year 1 000, the end of the first millennium, there was general panic in many parts of Christian Europe. Penitents flocked to churches and monasteries with cartloads of their possessions, including jewels and gold and silver coins, hoping to buy God's grace before Judgment Day.

There were similar scenes in some Muslim-majority countries in 1591, as the year 1 000 in the Muslim calendar approached. In 1999, many people refused to be in the air at midnight on 31st

December because they were afraid the millennium bug would put the world's computers out of action, along with their answer phones and fax machines. The British government produced an eight-page insert to go into the tabloid newspapers, telling householders how to deal with the coming threat. It reassured them that, while their computers might go down, the glitch would not affect their lawn mowers and their hedge trimmers and their rotovators and their barbeques and their swimming pool filters. Life in suburbia could continue.

18 years later, the furor seems almost funny, but many people were much afraid at the time.

Last year *Forbes* magazine published the prophecies of a number of distinguished scientists in an article headlined *The four ways the earth will actually end*. Some of their images are very like the images Jesus is reported as using in response to the disciples' questions – they say the sun will swell, and heat up, making the seas boil; new volcanos will erupt and light up the night sky; the earth will become barren and lifeless . . . not a cheerful picture, but, these scientists tell us, humankind will have become extinct by them, so there will be no-one around to face the end. Jesus also tells us that humankind's sufferings will be over before the coming of the Son of Man.

In my nursing home ministry, I find that the residents are not so much concerned about the end of the age, or the end of the world, as they are about the end of their own life – how they will face death and what lies beyond. What will happen to them, and to their families?

So, when it seems appropriate, I remind them of Jesus' promises, especially those recorded in the Gospel according to John -- *In my Father's house are many rooms . . . I go to prepare a place for you* (Jn 14.2); *I give those who follow me eternal life, and they shall never perish* (Jn 10.28).

I assure them that their concerns are everyone's concerns; they are nothing to be worried about or to be ashamed of. A thousand years before Jesus came to earth, King David was telling his people that God was ever faithful, even as his people come towards the end of their lives, or, as he put it, as they walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We can all fear no evil.

We had another reminder of this certainty today, as we sang the Song of Hannah, which proclaims that God is in control of all that is, our God is God in life and in death. So we can all exult in the Lord. We shall do that together this afternoon in our annual service of remembering, when we remember and honour our own loved ones who have passed over, family members and friends. I hope many of you will come to the updated service Peter has approved.

If the end of the age and the end of time and the end of our time on earth are all foreordained and we can do nothing to avert them or to change them, what are we to do? The two images in *Connections* are reminders from today's culture of Jesus' teachings about what we should do.

Firstly, we are to keep calm and carry on. This is a poster the British government produced in 1939 to prepare the British people for war, and for the mass air attacks on British cities it knew were inevitable. The slogan was rediscovered in 2000 and trademarked and commercialised.

The message matches Jesus' teaching on the last things – from the gospel according to Matthew, chapter 24: *two men will be in the field, one will be taken and one will be left; two women will be grinding meal together, one will be taken and the other left* (Mt 24.vv40-41). Translate that into modern terms, two people will be together in a restaurant, or in an office, or in a train, maybe even, in a pew, *one will be taken and the other left*. Jesus does not tell us to stop working in the field or in the mill, but says that life will go on as normal to the very end.

St Paul had some harsh words for some early Christians who gave up work, and sponged off other Christians, believing that Jesus would return any day and wind up the world (2 Thess. Ch 3). Why earn money that would soon be worthless, or build a house that was soon to be burnt up, or buy a farm which his family would soon have to leave? Paul earned his own living, and insisted that other believers do the same. Until Christ returns.

The second main lesson that Jesus taught was that his people should be ever ready for his return, they should live as if he were coming back today, or tonight. One of his parables about being ever ready comes at the end of this 13th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark. Servants are looking after a property while the owner is away. They appoint a doorkeeper to keep watch for the master's return. *Keep alert, Jesus says, for you do not know when the time will come.*

The Gospels include four other parables with a similar message, they are all familiar: the parable of the thief in the night (Mt.ch 24, Lk ch 12); the parable of the unfaithful servant (Mt ch 24, Lk ch 12); the parable of the ten wise virgins (Mt ch 25); and the parable of the talents (Mt ch 25, Lk ch 19).

They all have the same message – we need to keep calm and continue living in God, and for God, and we need to be ever ready for his return, even though we can never know the day or the hour. If we are ready for his return, we will be ready for anything that happens in the meantime – for the end of our age, our civilisation, and our own time on earth.

Clearly then, this is an important message -- this is what Jesus taught his disciples after he had left the temple for the last time; he knew what could happen to them as they continued his ministry, but he knew they could do all things if they continued to trust in him, and to live in his strength. The message is the same for us. May we continue to live with God and in God, the eternal I AM, the eternal present. Then we will face the future without fear. #

FACING THE FUTURE

