

Pentecost 26 – Year B - Perspectives

You can always tell when we're nearing the end of the Church year. The readings turn "dark," according to some people's estimation. We hear about "end times." We have our first reading from Daniel, one of those apocalyptic books. And in the Gospel, Jesus, too, speaks about cataclysms and destruction. Like the apostles in the gospel, all this leads many folks to think about the proverbial "end of the world," the "end times." Some preach that these readings are meant to help us take stock of the state of our lives and make some reforms. Throughout history, different religious groups have looked at readings such as these and then at the state of the world around them and concluded that the scriptures are, indeed, "coming to pass."

But I want us to take a step back from all that this morning. I would say that how we hear today's Gospel depends on where we are standing – or where we think we are standing.

I used to teach a class on Death & Dying, and when we talked about grief and loss, I always told the class that grief is our emotional response to loss. But the nature of our grief will be dependent on the meaning of the loss for us. For some people, the loss of their father is heart wrenching, because he was a dear friend as much as a father. But for the child who suffered abuse at the hands of that same man, for the daughter who had to fear his nighttime visits to her room or the wife who had to hide bruises from her neighbors, the death of that same man may bring feelings of relief or even joy.

For the Jewish elite, for the scribes and Pharisees, the temple leaders, Jesus' proclamation that the stones of the temple will not be left one on another is anathema. Utter destruction! It cannot be! It MUST not be! - But to those for whom the Temple and all the religious domination it stood for meant oppression, Jesus' promise that it would all come to ruin is good news! Remember last week's Gospel and the widow depositing her two cents into the treasury? Remember the lines before that, when Jesus says, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers." The Temple and the structures of religious power associated with it, Jesus says, have been built by exploiting the poor, the widows.

And immediately after that, as they exit the Temple, one unnamed disciple says, “Wow! Look at these huge stones, such large buildings!” How great the success, how marvelous the temple! But at what cost?

Apocalypse, literally, means “unveiling”. And in this chapter of Mark’s gospel, Jesus is doing a lot of unveiling – of turning things upside down, of inviting us to see behind the curtain in the Wizard of Oz. I don’t think we need to be worrying a great deal about the end times. I don’t think we need to ask the question that Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask: “When will this be? What will be the signs that these things are about to be accomplished?”

It’s a question that we find natural to ask, of course. If we know when the end is coming, we can be ready, right? But that assumes that we only need to be ready for the quiz... we only need to have things in order when the inspector comes. Notice that Jesus doesn’t *answer* the question. Instead, he says things will be upended. Nation will rise against nation; there will be famine and earthquakes. The apparent good order of things will be turned to chaos, essentially. And then he speaks the most important words of this gospel passage, I think: “This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

Several years ago, I worked with a man who was nearing retirement. He was a former Roman Catholic priest, as I recall, now married and essentially separated from any church. He and his wife gathered with like-minded others for prayer and community. That particular year, there was a great deal of unrest – in society and in the church. Since that’s so uncommon, you can see why I have trouble remembering when this really took place! In any case, he said to me that he had become hopeful again, and that – in fact – he was going to put up his Creche, a nativity scene, for the first time in years. He had hope, because when things were in such a state of unrest, it was a sure sign that something new was about to be born, a new consciousness, a new awareness of God was at hand.

What I heard him saying, essentially, was that when things look bad, it’s a sign of hope! And that’s what I hear Jesus saying in this Gospel passage. All the discord, the war, the eruption of nature, the famine – they are the birthpangs, the clues, part of the process of new life.

And the new life is the reign of God. And we have the opportunity, and the responsibility, and the call to be part of the birthing. We have the possibility to face the hatred, the vitriol all around us these days – and to address it with a spirit of love and compassion. We can go to those suffering from the effects of earthquake and fire and BE the hands and feet of Christ for them by how we respond to their needs. And we can also take action to address the underlying causes of climate change.

We can show solidarity with those who are disenfranchised, by making their plight known. And we can also take action to restore the voices of those who are silenced by addressing voting laws and gerrymandering.

We can feed the hungry and provide shelter to the homeless, and we do. But we can also ask ourselves the hard questions, like what is it about the way I live that contributes to the ways others must live?

Natural disasters, one group of people trying to dominate another, the waging of war, human suffering - none of these are new. They have been with us since before the book of Daniel was written, and they are still with us all these centuries after Mark gives us Jesus' words. But always in the midst of that suffering, God speaks words of hope to God's people: "There shall be a time of anguish," Daniel writes - "But at that time your people shall be delivered." With the psalmist, we sang:

My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; my body also shall rest in hope.

For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit.

And Jesus tells us: "This is but the beginning of the birthpangs."

We are never born to something new without losing something else. My prayer is that we can see – in these apocalyptic readings, and in the times of turmoil in which we live, not foreboding of impending judgment or an immanent end, but the unveiling of the hope planted there, the opportunity for us each to be part of the birthing, a part of the continued coming of the reign of God in our midst that is our belief in Incarnation.

May it be so.

[Daniel 12:1-3](#) [Psalm 16](#) [Hebrews 10:11-14 \(15-18\) 19-25](#) [Mark 13:1-8](#)