**

Daniel 12.1-3
Mark 13.1-8**
**14th November 2021**

## Defiant Hope

 *Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts
Be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen*

An American reporter, covering the Blitz of 1940, cabled home a piece describing the night of 29th December, when 100,000 incendiary bombs fell on the capital, as the beginning of the *Second Great Fire of London.* For in that night alone a greater area saw its buildings raised to the ground than in the first fire of 1666.

In recent years a group of us from AFC have taken part in Christian Aid’s *Circle the City* sponsored walk on a May Sunday afternoon. We go from one church to another in the square mile. Even though many were designed by Wren after that first fire, most have had to be rebuilt after the second, including St Mary le Bow, where the walk starts, to All Hallows by The Tower, at one of the walk’s outer most points.

Buildings can look truly monumental as if they are destined to stand for all time. Castles and Cathedrals have a timeless quality about them betraying their vulnerability, especially at a time of war.

So it was that day when Jesus and his disciples leave the magnificent courts of the Jerusalem temple in today’s gospel. This great house of God was designed to thrill and inspire those who worshipped within it. Its architecture had worked its magic on some of these disciples who declared to Jesus that these were *huge stones* and this a *fine building.*

Imagine, then, their surprise when Jesus replies: *You see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another, they will all be thrown down.*Jesus’ words came true in AD 70 when Rome destroyed the Temple leaving only the Wailing Wall intact.

But that had been typical of its history. Solomon’s great temple, with its five altars, was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. The second temple, a much more modest affair with just two courts, was completed by 515 BC. Yet this building was often plundered and raided by invading armies. One of its greatest saviours was Judas Maccabaeus in an episode which is commemorated by the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. This small second temple was then rebuilt by Herod the Great starting in 20BC, a task that took 46 years and saw its size double.

Yet even this great building, now faced in gleaming white stone, the epicentre of the nation’s life and identity wasn’t to last forever, and in AD70 its walls came tumbling down.

So, metaphorically, and perhaps literally too, Jesus asks the question *where do we turn when not just buildings, but people, ideas and dreams come crashing around us?*To do that he employs what is often described in the bible as apocalyptic imagery. It’s the genre of literature from our first reading in Daniel and was very popular. If Netflix had been around then it would have certainly had an apocalyptic stream of films constantly on offer.

Mark 13 even has the title amongst scholars of *The Little Apocalypse*. So today, appropriately enough on Remembrance Sunday, we too ask the question prompted by Jesus in our passage: where does our hope come from when our world seems to be on fire and crumbling around us?

For we can all have our own L*ittle Apocalypse.*Sometimes it is obvious and those around us see our pain. Bereavement and major health issues, alongside unemployment or family breakups would be such a time. Moments that crush us and times we simply do not feel equipped to face. The trauma of these experiences stays with us.

At other times few around us see our pain. We can doubt our faith, feel anxious for our children, worry about our finances. Yet in these private parts of life, it can seem as if the world becomes a tougher place.

I suspect that for many the Pandemic has been a mixture of these two experiences. As someone has said: *We might be all in the same storm, but we are in different boats.* Covid, in its own way, has been a *little apocalypse* none of us was prepared for and it brought down some of what we thought was the most secure parts of life and made us feel truly vulnerable.

So, here in Mark 13 Jesus urges his followers to stay loyal to him in the tough moments. That inner quartet, made up of two sets of brothers, Peter, Andrew, James and John hear him say: *let no one mislead you and be on your guard against those who say, ‘I am he’.*It’s a question that has never gone away. What sort of God, what sort of Saviour and what sort of Helper do we believe in? Do we trust in a *Christlike God,* or are we looking for something else, for someone else to be at the centre of our faith?

This was a vibrant debate in Jesus’ day because it’s clear that other voices than just his declared they spoke on behalf of God. Alternative Messiahs were available, and still are!

The most obvious example would have been the longing of the Zealots in Jesus’ day. They looked for a political messiah who would bring liberation through power and force.

In many ways that was totally understandable and had a sense of history on its side. They thought back to the golden reign of King David and his many military victories. Surely, the one who was to come in David’s name as David’s Greater Son would also be a military hero?

Jesus disappointed a lot of people.

We’ve spent the last 2000 years struggling to work out the message of Jesus and remain true to his presentation to us, by what he both said and how he lived, of the character of God.

In Jerusalem, after a visit to the temple that day, Jesus sits down with these two sets of siblings and says: *Do not be misled.* That moment obviously stuck with them and one of them passed on this private conversation to Mark who has recorded it for us.

But what does that conversation mean to us today? If we had been one of the four, what could it have meant to us? It may seem an uncomfortable question, but can faith mislead us?

Can power sometimes masquerade as faith? Can certainty sometimes become a replacement for truth?

Jesus urges these brothers not to be misled.

This isn’t an easy part of pilgrimage, seeking to listen out for the voice of our Christlike God. In my personal little apocalypse what is God saying to me?

I suspect God is always whispering us a word of welcome whenever we feel lost. I suspect God is always urging us to live with love, to be generous in spirit and walk compassionately alongside others. And I suspect that instead of believing in quick fixes, the God who showed his face to us in Jesus, says to us that even when the walls come tumbling down, love can be stronger than any walls and bear all things.

Today’s passage urges us to take hold and cultivate such a sense of *Defiant Hope* in our lives.

Remember these words were written about the time of the Fall of Jerusalem in AD70. The world for Mark and his readers looked bleak. Yet into those years when so many were struggling to make sense of life, he urges the followers of Jesus to hang on to his message and the testimony of his life. This is Mark’s rallying cry to a young Church at a time of their own Little Apocalypse. Keep trusting in Jesus.

The Bible teacher, Walter Brueggemann, says that we Christians, and here I quote *traffic in a fiction that makes true.*

And what I think he meant by that is we hold on to ideals, hopes and aspirations that to some people may seem like fiction, which may seem unbelievable. Open any newspaper or watch any news bulletin and it’s easy to believe in despair, death and sorrow. Yet the Christian story won’t do that. There’s a defiant hope at the centre of Christianity which speaks of joy, peace and love. It’s God’s joy. God’s peace and God’s love. And although at times it may seem like a fiction, we believe it’s a reality brought about by the transforming power of the Spirit, the Spirit of love. And we are thankful or such a defiant hope – which is based in God. For we *traffic in a fiction that makes true.*

One Saturday we were having our packed lunch on the steps of the Guildhall Art Gallery before going in and spending an hour looking at the wonderful pictures amassed by the City Corporation of London. A tour guide turned up with a little group and we listened in.

He told them about the ancient Guildhall opposite us. The centre of London’s ancient wealth. A place of power and influence down the centuries.

He told them that its ancient hammer beam roof was bombed in the Blitz and what we see today is a 20th century reconstruction of the roof.

He finished his tale with a lyrical twist. Recalling a storey from that fateful night of 29th December 1940, the night of the Second Great Fire of London, the word went out from Winston Churchill that if it came to a decision of whether to save the Guildhall or St Paul’s Cathedral. St Paul’s must be saved at all costs.

I felt then, as I do now, that it was a moving story of a Premier who, in looking towards future days knew the importance of all that St Paul’s Cathedral stood for. A sense of trust in God.

May such trust in a God of love and hope grant us all a defiant hope today and always. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 8th November 2021*