

Birth Pangs Of A New Age

It is quite clear from the opening words of today's Gospel, that the Christianity was birthed in troubled times. If we are to unpack this narrative in search of a meaning for today, we run the very real risk of getting bogged down in conflicts that have very little to do with the faith of the nascent church.

There are three scenes to engage in my response this morning.

In order, they will be:

- 1 the impending destruction of the temple
- 2 The bombing of Dresden
- 3 And finally, the unrest in our response to covid.

Let me unfold each of these scenes before offering a response for today.

13 And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" 2 And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

What must it have been like for the disciples to hear Jesus talking about the temple in this way? By the time that converts were reading copies of the Gospel, there would have been huge change, but at the time that Jesus and his disciples are engaged in the conversation about the destruction of the temple, it is still quite early in the life of the church. Indeed, it is not until the story shifts to Rome, that we begin to hear terms such as Christian.

Scene one.

3 And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" 5 And Jesus began to say to them, "See that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. 7 And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. 8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

It is one thing to talk the destruction of the temple, but all this turmoil. All this apocalyptic chaos; must have led to sleepless nights for more than just a few people. As readers of the text who seek to understand what it means to us, the question for us might well be, "where do we start?"

Bishop Tom Wright asked that question, and came to the very clear opinion, that we should digest verse 8. 'These are the beginnings of the birth pangs.'

I am sure we all understand that not only are birth pangs painful, they are also signs of a new beginning. Indeed, the term is frequently used as a form of metaphor in many ways, only some of which herald childbirth.

One might ask, what confronts us today? Can we talk of the same kind of destruction and upheaval that the disciples were looking at?

It doesn't take long to realise that the unsettled-ness that Jesus was referring to was a very complicated mix of both politics and religion. Religion, because the Pharisees in particular were on edge because of the ministry of Jesus. He seemed to be breaking their rules at every turn and they were worried that they could lose control. Jesus intention of fulfilling the purpose of the law ran counter to their inflexibility. Trouble was never far away.

Politics because Israel was occupied by the Romans. To make matters worse, the Romans were taxing the Hebrews so that they could continue the occupation. It really was just a matter of time before something gave way. When it did, it would be catastrophic. In effect, there were three different agendas at play. The Pharisees, together with Sadducees were anxious about their church. Rome was concerned about the unrest. Jesus and his disciples were hardly players of the magnitude of the Jews and the Romans, but they were active and growing, enough to be a touch fuse in the mixture.

Scene two

In 1982, I went to a Clergy conference in Marton. We had (as a visiting theologian) one, Hans-Rudie Weber.

In a hugely dramatic turn of events, he talked to us about bombing of Dresden. Whilst some of our older Clerics of the time were not all that sympathetic, (Most of them being influenced by the narratives being rehearsed by their old folks.) a number us, then younger ones, were upset. Dresden had been consumed by a colossal fire-storm. 25,000 people died in the raid. In his 1963 book *The Destruction of Dresden*, David Irving would claim that the bombing was "the biggest single massacre in European history."

Those younger Clerics at the Marton conference, took pen to paper and started writing prayers, influenced by horrors we had just heard. After editing, some of that material found it's way into the *New Zealand Prayer Book*.

How on earth could civilized people wreak such horrible destruction on one another? I often still feel the pain of that memory.

Scene Three

Our nation is in the grip of a pandemic. This is a time when we should have the courage to listen to the professionals. But what do we do? We find it hard to be unified. To be a part of Jacinda's team of 5 million.

A few days ago, a gathering protesters presented themselves at Parliament. The stated purpose was individual freedom. As is so often the way however, others joined the scene with their own complaints. Whilst the core issues were mandated vaccination, and no jab no job, it was disturbing to see the New Zealand flag, the Maori flag, several Trump flags and swastikas. To my way of thinking, if there were just causes in their ranks, they were lost in their association. They weren't concerned about the team of 5 million. What I find particularly disturbing, is that the anger of these people, fueled by disinformation, is very strongly egocentric.

A direct spinoff of this protest, is the fact that even though Adrienne and I are fully vaccinated, we are unable to visit family who are not vaccinated. Though fully vaccinated, we can still be carriers. We have no wish to enable the possibility of taking the virus to our family. Adding all these different issues together, presents us with an apparently disparate conundrum.

History tells us that the temple was destroyed in 70ce. Rome was sacked in 476ce,¹ Christianity however, survived and eventually flourished following the conversion of Constantine.

One might argue that there is a very significant element of ineluctability about the Church. Because the church is called into being by God, it cannot fail. Change yes, but not fail.

¹ *The Western Roman Empire officially ended 4 September 476 CE, when Emperor Romulus Augustulus was deposed by the Germanic King Odoacer (though some historians date the end as 480 CE with the death of Julius Nepos).*

Change! How must we change?

Our question for today, in this place, needs to address the dysfunctional stirrings we live amongst. Our fellowship needs to be a safe place for the disaffected to find haven. Because our faith is about our gathered-ness, we should disavow the self centred-ness of those who claim a right of self-determination.

Conclusion

There is another step I want to offer to you all. We have all heard expressions such as "as you sow, so you reap" We are all moulded by the life choices we make. Presently, we live in a world that has more than it's share of dysfunctional behaviour, but the good thing, is that.....

what is wrong about our communities, is totally over shadowed by what is good.

What the church has taught us through 2000 years, is that we become what we practice. We have been taught to spend time in worship and we have been taught to celebrate the memorial feast that unites us with Christ.

We need to recognise that by immersing ourselves in a daily pattern of worship, and regularly following our worship with a regular memorial celebration of the Eucharist, regulates our whole being. In our worship, we put on the mind of Christ. In the breaking of the bread we are constantly fed by the bread of life.

It is not our role to be haranguing and coercing; We are simply called to be a people of Prayer and celebration. Like yeast in the baking of bread, we are to be a fermenting agent of change in a wrest-less world. If we have a life of prayer and worship then that practice molds our lives in a particular way. Tom Wright talked of the birth pangs of a new age. Indeed it is a new life. As we engage this love for each and for God, changes start to happen; perhaps painful at first, but very soon there is the joy of a new creation.