

Sunday 17 November 2024, 2nd Sunday before Advent

Mark 13.1-8

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

I want to talk to you today about institutions. As many of you will be aware, the Archbishop of Canterbury has announced his resignation after facing fierce criticism over his response to the revelation of historic child abuse by barrister John Smyth. For many in the Church of England, this feels like a foundation-shaking moment. As I'm sure all of you are aware, the Conservative Party suffered a significant defeat in the recent general election after what some perceived to be too many years of failing to respond adequately to concerns about, among other things, overstretched public services and decaying infrastructure. The current Labour Prime Minister's approval rating, however, is at an unprecedented low.

To those of us accustomed to building our lives around institutions, the times in which we live can feel deeply unsettling. Government seems unresponsive; the Church seems to be actively colluding in concealing wrongdoing. I would not be surprised if other institutions, which we have trusted and on which we still depend, were viewed with the same deep disappointment. In such a context, today's Gospel from St Mark feels profoundly appropriate, because it is a reminder not to place our hope in the things we build, in human institutions or human programmes.

We find ourselves with Jesus and the disciples on the Temple Mount. Previously, in chapter 12, we heard the story of the so-called 'widow's mite', a scene that takes place at the Temple treasury. And what a treasury that was in the marvellous Second Temple, substantially rebuilt and augmented by Herod the Great in the first century AD. It was the largest religious complex in the ancient world, a 36-acre extension of an actual mountain topped with a series of progressively more religiously-exclusive courtyards lined with colonnades of hundreds of columns. The largest recorded single block of stone used in the construction weighed some 600 tons and measured 14 by 3.5 by 5 meters. What large stones and what large buildings indeed!

The institution the Temple represented dated back thousands of years and was the heart of a nation, both its religion and its government. Yet Jesus does not seem as taken with the mighty Temple as his disciples expect. *Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.* This is a prediction of destruction that was fulfilled not long after Jesus' death when the Romans sacked the Temple in AD70, razed it to the ground, and carried off the contents of its treasury. As Josephus records: 'from King David, who was the first of the Jews who reigned therein, to this destruction under Titus, were one thousand, one hundred, and seventy nine years. But from its first building, till this last destruction, were two thousand, one hundred, seventy seven years. Yet hath not its great antiquity; nor its vast riches; nor the diffusion

of its nation over all the habitable earth; nor the greatness of the veneration paid to it on a religious account, been sufficient to preserve it from being destroyed.'

Antiquity, riches, veneration by millions. None were sufficient to prevent its destruction. And many Jews were utterly bereft. The destruction of the Temple provoked for some a crisis of faith and utterly transformed Judaism from a religion centred on sacrifice in a particular place to a religion centred on teaching conducted in disparate synagogues.

Now let me bring us back up from the history books to today. Failing governments. Disgraceful behaviour from respected clergy. Institutions everywhere in crisis. What is one to think? What is to be done? How should we respond? I think it's interesting that Jesus doesn't seem to have a lot of time for the institution of the Temple. Its human aspect, its stones and columns and marble courts, don't seem all that important to him. And he describes the destruction yet to come as *the beginning of the birthpangs*. The birth of what, one is prompted to ask. Mark's gospel gives us a clear answer as chapter 13 continues: the birth of a new kingdom. *Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven... Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*

Jesus is not concerned with the ephemera of institutions because they are not the point. In fact, their point is simply to point imperfectly to something else: the kingdom which God will establish of which all human institutions are but shadowy reflections. That kingdom is where our focus should be because only there will we find fulfilment, only there will we be content. Only in the kingdom of God, with Christ himself on the throne, will we find undisappointed hope. The things we humans build will always, inevitably, disappoint- if not now, then later. They will disappoint and they will fail. The things God builds will never fail, never disappoint, and never be overthrown.

So, in a way, it doesn't really matter if the Archbishop resigns. It doesn't matter if the Government is voted out or collapses. It doesn't matter in the ultimate sense, though it may cause consternation and distress for a time, because where our hearts and minds as Christians should already be dwelling is in the kingdom which has been revealed in Jesus and will one day come in its fulness. On that day he will return with the holy angels to judge the world and all the things we have made and the institutions we have built.

Your confidence and your security should not be tied to things so impermanent as Churches and Governments. Your confidence and security should be tied to Jesus Christ who is the Great High Priest and the King of Kings. When you believe in him you can weather any storm, survive any collapse, endure any trial and- in time, by the working of the Holy Spirit- come out on top. Believing in him makes you a part of that kingdom which is coming and, even when all is thrown down (as it all will be at the end of time) you will stand firm because he, your Lord, stands firm. *All will be thrown down*, but Christ stands above all. Stand then with him, trust fully in him, and though the whole world should burn you will stand secure. Amen.