

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Be on your Guard

Mary Duncanson

Sunday 14th October 2012

Daniel 11: 28-32
Mark 13: 1-27

Most of you are aware that I am studying for my BTh of Theology with Aberdeen University. This term's module is on 'Religion and the Self' - I have to admit that it is taking me slightly out of my comfort zone, but I am also finding it very fascinating. This week we were discussing whether emotions are universal. You may wonder what relevance this has to the passages that were read this morning. Hopefully all will be revealed.

The discussion on whether emotions are universal took us to topics such as the children found in the orphanages in Romania who had been brought up in an environment starved of emotional stimulus to how emotions were aroused at the Nuremberg rallies of the 30's or the Billy Graham rallies of the 50's; the techniques used to trigger peoples emotions. It shows how emotions can be manipulated, leaving you with the questions 'Who do you believe', 'What do you believe' or 'Who do you trust'?

A few years ago, a friend of mine, who worked for the NGO HelpAge International, was asked to go to Rwanda for a month as a trouble shooter for the organisation. Rwanda as you will remember went through turbulent times of the tribal wars between the Hutu and Tutsi, culminating with the horrendous genocide that affected almost every family, every village and all social classes with an estimated 20% of the population being killed. In the end no-one could trust anyone, even within their own families. My friend is someone who is very laidback and not normally phased by things. So on his return I asked him if he had been frightened. His reply was that he hadn't slept very well. That comment signalled to me that he had been unnerved by his time there and had been very much on his guard.

Be on your guard, be alert. Stay awake! Wakefulness is essential for interpreting this chapter from Mark's gospel. It is not an easy chapter to understand. In fact William Barclay called it the most difficult chapter in the New Testament!

Jesus was telling people to 'stay awake', 'be on your guard', 'don't believe everything you are told', 'there will be false prophets'. But why did Jesus give this warning and what was he prophesying about? It is important to put them into some kind of context; the context of both Jesus' life and in the context of Mark's life.

Jesus as we know lived in a time of great political and religious unrest. He lived as a subject person in a land where the Roman Empire had disrupted, influenced and even ruled his life from the time of his birth to his death on the Cross. We also saw him constantly at loggerheads with the powerful religious leaders of the Jewish faith. Apocalyptic writing and prophecy is born out of a state of political and religious turmoil. The Old Testament is full of apocalyptic prophets. But here was Jesus predicting not only the Temple's doom but also the collapse of the social ideology and the power structure of his own society.

Jesus started speaking in what we might call apocalyptic metaphors, like the prophets of the Old Testament. And similar to what we heard in the passage from Daniel, he used classic apocalyptic imagery. No wonder his disciples were unnerved. No wonder they wanted to know when this would happen. Was Jesus telling them that they should join the uprising and fight to save the Temple? No, he wasn't. Initially he said that people should stand firm, be watchful and be alert. Three times he says this in the chapter, 'be alert, be on your guard'. But it would be the desecration of the Temple that would be the sign. When invading armies placed pagan idols to another god in the Temple, this he said would not be the time to stay and be patient; this would be the sign that it was the time to get out and run.

Today we know that in parts of our world there is political and religious turmoil. So does do the apocalyptic prophecies still apply to us today? Should we be on our guard? Do we see similarities today? Maybe we do. We remember with disbelief the images of the planes deliberately flying into the twin towers on September 11th 2001. Those acts of terrorism that changed the world as we knew it. The Arab Spring removed the dictatorship in Tunisia, Gaddafi in Libya and Mubarak in Egypt. The war in Iraq removed Saddam Hussein. Paradoxically all those deposed leaders had shielded the Christian communities in those countries. These Christian communities are now under threat and many are fleeing those countries. In Syria, there was a time when Jews, Christians, Kurds and Sunni Muslims all lived reasonably harmoniously in the same neighbourhoods. Now we are seeing thousands of all religions fleeing to Jordan or Turkey as refugees, as the Syrian Government bomb the cities and villages killing and injuring innocent people, many of them children, in their attempt to remove the insurgents. Catherine Buchan, our minister, told me that Sandy Sneddon, of the World Mission Council of the Church of Scotland, was in Pakistan when a Christian church, a vicarage and a Christian school were destroyed by fire by Muslim protesters, protesting against the release of the American film which they feel criticises their Prophet Mohammed. No Christians were killed or injured because they all fled. When we reflect on all these events, maybe we do have to be watchful and be alert.

Returning to the gospel reading, let's look at it in the context of Mark's life. Why were Jesus' prophecies so important to Mark? Mark's gospel is the shortest of the four gospels. He wrote it for a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles. It feels like he wrote it in a great hurry. It is full of emotion and passion. You get the sense he is so desperate to tell you all the stories about Jesus. It is only when you realise that when he wrote his gospel it was at a time of great social and religious unrest in Palestine. He wrote it around 70AD, the year that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. The situation had been brewing and developing for about four years. Suddenly Mark could see Jesus' prophecies unfolding before him. That is why it is important to put Jesus' prophecies into the context of Mark's life. As there had been a growing power struggle amongst the Roman hierarchy, the Jewish guerrillas took advantage of the situation and tried to oust the Romans out of their country. They almost succeeded, but the Romans marched on Jerusalem and laid siege to the city; eventually the city fell. It was looted and the Temple was burnt to the ground. During those years, the questions that were being asked by the early church were: *Should we join the uprising or not? Do we fight for the Temple and all that it means? Is this our moment of freedom?*

When Jesus was alive, many expected him to fight their fights for them. They saw how he challenged the Jewish leaders. He had said that it was part of God's purpose that the entire political, religious and social power structure of the Temple State should be overthrown. To most people they interpreted that to mean to take up arms - a violent overthrow. They had expected Jesus to fight on their behalf against the Romans. They said, 'Surely he will fight for us and our God? Surely that is what being the Messiah means, if that is what he and his followers claim he is'.

But Mark was at pains to say that is not Jesus' way. It was not the way of Jesus when he was alive and it is not the way of Jesus now. He said, what Jesus brings us is a deeper revolution, but it doesn't come by violent means. He does not advocate replacing one power structure with another. If we follow Jesus' way we won't suffer the fate of most of the world's revolutions who destroyed their own people and their own children - as what happened between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or Pol Pot's Cambodia or in Bosnia and what we are witnessing today in Syria. Mark was telling the early church that their calling as Christians was to be faithful to the way of Jesus in the public place. He said that being faithful in that tumultuous and awful situation, was to endure, stand firm, be alert and be ever watchful. What Mark said then, applies just as equally to us today.

The end is not destruction, but a completely new order of existence in which righteousness dwells in full and perfect harmony. In that new order of things the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ himself will gather from the whole earth and the whole of history his own chosen people. Everything, to the smallest and greatest detail is in God's hand. All sorts of things may yet happen. Things that are beyond our imagining or our understanding. But the truth for the believer is that our lives are hidden with Christ in God. As Paul wrote in Romans, we are assured that there is nothing, known or yet to become known, that has the power to separate us, from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.