Sunday 19 November 2006: Second Sunday before Advent

‘All things come to an end’


‘I told you last night that I might be gone sometime and you said, “Where?” and I said “To be with the Good Lord”, and you said “Why?” and I said “Because I’m old” and you said “I don’t think you’re old” and you put your hand in my hand and you said “You aren’t very old” as if that settled it. I told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you’ve had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life. And you said “Mama already told me that”. And then you said “Don’t laugh” because you thought I was laughing at you. You reached up and put your fingers on my lips and gave me that look I never in my life, saw on any other face besides your mother’s. I’m always a little surprised to find my eyebrows unsinged after I’ve suffered one of those looks. I will miss them.

It seems ridiculous to suppose the dead miss anything. If you’re a grown man when you read this, as is my intention, then I’ll have been gone a long time. I’ll know most of what there is to know about being dead, but I’ll probably keep it to myself. That seems to be the way of things.’

An elderly clergyman writing to his young son in Marilyn Robinson’s ‘Gilead’.

All things come to an end and what we can know about that end will be limited. ‘Do you see these great buildings?’ Jesus asked. ‘Not one stone here will be left upon another … This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.’

Given a free hand I’m not sure how many people preaching in churches around the country this morning would choose today’s Gospel. I pondered over it for ages and was just about to start writing something focussed principally on the epistle but somehow I was drawn back. Perhaps it was the stones from this place that we were given at the Patronal Festival last Sunday.

As the disciples were leaving the temple one of them comments on the stones and buildings ‘Look teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Herod’s temple must have been awe-inspiring. It had taken decades to build and was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Herod the Great ruled over Palestine with Rome’s acquiescence, keeping the peace, but he was only half Jewish by birth and wanted to ingratiate himself with the population and its leaders. What better way than by building them the biggest and best of temples? It was made of gleaming white marble. Josephus tells us that the stones from which it was built measured 25x8x12 cubits – that’s to say – about 12x3x5 metres. Perhaps he exaggerated but, by any standards, they must have been massive. Under the cornice was a golden vine with clusters of grapes hanging from it. All seem to have been amazed and impressed by it.

That’s the easy bit concerned with this reading really. Some basic information about the Temple. But what is there in it that might echo down the centuries to speak to us of our faith, as we move towards Advent, and that might link with our lives? All that ‘sign of the times’ stuff – the talk of wars and rumours of wars, of earthquakes and famine has, of course, often been used by certain groups of Christians to make predictions and to read the end times into whatever happens to be going on in the world but, for many people, they’ve cried wolf too often to be taken seriously.
But all things come to an end and what we can know about that end will be limited.

The disciples expressed utter amazement at the sight of the temple. We’re so used to being presented with the amazing now that it can be hard for us cynical 21st century people to hold onto a sense of wonder but perhaps there may be a cathedral that will have done that for you at some point in your life – the nave at Winchester, the spire at Salisbury, the massive columns of Durham – possibly something in this building that we’re just about to restore and develop.

All of these buildings have been costly and, in many cases, that will have been a cost not just in economic terms but in lives. All were built to the glory of God. Herod’s temple was a symbol of God’s presence among his people and its architecture, like that of the great mediaeval cathedrals, inspired awe and worship. Some of us approach God through buildings.

The disciples were impressed but then Mark, short, sharp and to the point as ever, tells us of Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of the temple. Not one stone was left upon another. And, of course, those weren’t the words of some misguided crystal ball-gazer – it did happen. At the end of a disastrous rising against Rome the temple was destroyed by fire and its stones were levelled to the ground. You can see some archaeological evidence if you go to Jerusalem today but the temple isn’t there.

No building lasts for ever. When, last Sunday, we were each invited to take a piece of stone from the massive work that’s been going on around this building for the last 10 months or so, I was quite surprised at how light and porous and fragile it felt – almost like bone shot through with osteoporosis – very vulnerable. Stones crumble as the weather of decades and centuries bites into them and restoration is needed. We have a vision, even if not fully formed, for this building but, ultimately, decay or destruction will bring death to every building, even the most sacred, even those which symbolize God’s presence, even those most likely to inspire worship.

In the end the whole universe will crumble though I’m not sure that even the most able scientists can agree on how that will happen. Nothing lasts for ever, whether in our own lives, in society or in the world around us. Perhaps, in a way, it’s as well that our vision is relatively limited. Even today few of us will make it to a hundred and it’s hard to lift our human horizons much beyond a life-span realistically. Increasingly we’re asked to look ahead several decades as the threat of global warming increases and we may try to adjust our life-styles but we also cannot predict what may happen tomorrow.

Four disciples asked Jesus when his prophesy about the destruction of the temple would be fulfilled. But, quite naturally, they want to know more than just the timing, they want to know what the warning signs will be. In our very different world what connection can we make with that? Most people probably don’t expect the world to come to an imminent end, even with fears of ecological change, terrorism, pandemic disease or whatever. Mark’s world is not our world. He almost certainly expected the world to come to an end in a very short time and part of that expectation seems to have been the return of Jesus to gather his faithful followers to heaven. But some 2,000 years have elapsed now and those questions separate us from Mark’s world.

But perhaps those cathedrals or this building in its way, can give us a link. Because Jesus warns against too fervent an expectation of the end-time. ‘The end is still to come …. this is but the
beginning of the birth-pangs – do not be mis-lead’ and ‘For about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father’ as Matthew wrote.

Think of that place of worship that’s meant something particularly powerful to you. Worship will probably have been offered there for centuries and it still has the power to awake awe in people visiting today – as it did for you – but it will crumble in the end.

In the end. The end may not be yet but it is certain to come, at some time, as Mark believed. The end of the temple, the end of the cathedrals, the end of this church, the end of our own lives, the end of the universe. Nothing lasts for ever – except God.

But while we are here, we need to worship God, we need to provide new generations with the possibility to experience awe and wonder in the presence of the immortal, invisible and yet loving God. Across the centuries, in a different idiom, a different language, drawing on different expectations, Mark does speak even if, at times, it may seem only like a whisper. ‘What wonderful stones, what wonderful buildings’ but, within the whisper – nothing lasts for ever except the everlasting God whom we seek to worship in this place and in our daily lives.