

## The end is nigh

Mark 13:1-8

*On the northeast tip of North America,  
on an island called Newfoundland, there's an airport.  
It used to be one of the biggest airports in the world,  
and next to it is a town called Gander.*

This town, Gander, is the setting of the musical *Come from away*, which Beth and I have now seen twice. It's a surprising musical – it's set on September 11, 2001, and in the few the days after. It's heartbreaking, but it's also inspiring.

It captures, in a way I didn't expect a musical to capture, the feelings that we had during and after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The shock, the worry, the fear. Not just of the attacks and their immediate effects, but the fear that there would be more attacks, the immediate isolation, the consequences of all air travel being suspended, with people being stuck far away from home, and the worry of economic collapse. There was genuine concern that this could be the beginning of the end. We went to church on the Sunday after, and the planned service had been changed: the prayers focused on the attacks, and planned readings gave way to a gospel reading that was a parallel to the one we've heard this morning from Mark.

The story of the musical *Come from away* is the story of Gander in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. American airspace was closed. 38 planes carrying 7000 passengers and crew were diverted to Gander – which was a town of only 9000 people. Why Gander? Well, its airport was big enough, but it was also isolated enough that if any of those planes turned out to be carrying bombs, the resulting damage would be minimised.

In the musical, we see how the residents of Gander and the surrounding towns pull together to look after the 'plane people' - in the face of calamity, and in the face of loss, they did what they could, and gave what they could, even while they were afraid for themselves.

The thing that struck me the most about the musical was the way that it captured the 'unknowing' of those first hours and days. I remember being glued to the tv watching the same footage over and over again, hearing people saying the same things over and over again, but really not learning anything new. While I was doing that, there were people on planes, having been diverted to places they hadn't heard of for reasons they weren't told. And they just had to wait. All day of not knowing. It wasn't until after dark on that first day that they were taken off the planes.

You can imagine their thoughts: What's happening? Why is it happening? What's going to happen next? What's going to happen to us?

Those concerns are central to our gospel reading today. What's happening? Why is it happening? What's going to happen next? What's going to happen to us? As we heard in

the reading, Jesus and the disciples left the temple and one of the disciples remarked on the grandeur of the temple. As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" (13:1).

"Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (13:2)

Now it's easy to think that the Temple as something like a church or maybe a cathedral. But the temple was so much more to the Jewish people than simply a place of worship – it was not just a religious building. It was the centre of Israel, the economy of Jerusalem depended on the operation of the temple, it was the centre of Jewish power, it was a place of regular pilgrimage. Of course, within the temple was the Holy of Holies, where the people believed that God was present.

But as well as all that, it was also an amazing building. The second temple had been rebuilt by Herod the Great (the same Herod who we know of from the of Jesus' birth). It was, at the time, unquestionably one of the wonders of the world. For most people who saw it, and certainly for Jesus' disciples from Galilee, it would be the largest, most impressive building that they would ever see.

The disciples had, at the beginning of this reading, been with Jesus at the temple for some time, and it's been an eventful time. When they first arrived, Jesus drove the money changers out of the forecourt, then he cursed the fig tree, and then answered the challenging questions of the Pharisees and Sadducees - the questions about paying taxes to Caesar, marriage and resurrection, the greatest commandment and so on - it was a tumultuous time

And now, as they leave the temple, Jesus tells them it's going to be destroyed.

He's talking about the physical destruction of the temple – which would ultimately take place in AD70, although it must be said it wasn't literally as Jesus said – to this day, there are still a few stones of the temple left on one another, but in using this phrase, Jesus is linking back to the prophet Haggai's call to the people to build the temple stone upon stone (Haggai 2:15); but as well as the physical destruction, which, despite not being literally as Jesus said, was complete: It was no longer the temple, Jesus was also talking about the destruction of the temple as a symbol, as the centre of Jewish worship of God, and as the place from which it was generally thought by the Jews that the messiah would rule.

It's easy to think that the next verses of Mark 13 follow on: that the disciple remarked on the temple, Jesus said it would be destroyed, and the disciples asked for clarification. But it didn't quite happen like that – in fact quite some time elapsed between warning about the fate of the temple in verse 2, and the follow question up by some of the disciples in verse 3.

The Mount of Olives is a bit under two kilometres from the temple. A pleasant walk on a nice day, and the mountain is about 80 metres higher than the temple, and so had a great view of the temple.

My impression is the experience of the temple was something like the Opera House is to us today. We can go there, and we can look around, and look up at the sweeping sails and so on, and maybe go on a behind the scenes tour – and sure enough, it seems that 1st century visitors to the temple could go on tours of the Temple too.

So we can experience the Opera House up close, but you don't get to see the full splendour until you leave the Opera House itself, and walk around Circular Quay to the Overseas Terminal and see the Opera House against the backdrop of the harbour, or possibly better still, walk around Farm Cove to Mrs Macquaries Chair and see it against the backdrop of the Harbour Bridge.

It's a pleasant walk, with a fantastic view at the end, and which lets you properly appreciate a magnificent building.

And while the walk from the temple to the Mount of Olives would normally be a pleasant one, I think the walk that day for the disciples might have been a bit like those hours and days after the 9/11 attacks. – Jesus having announced the destruction of what was the spiritual, religious, political, economic and cultural centre of the Jewish world. You can imagine the disciples thinking: What's happening? Why is it happening? What's going to happen next? What's going to happen to us?

Finally, after the walk to the Mount of Olives Peter, Andrew, James and John – the inner circle of the disciples – approached Jesus privately and asked him, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" (13:4)

When?

Wouldn't it be good to know when?

But we can't know when – Jesus says so later in this chapter, in verse 32 - "*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" (13:32)

They couldn't know *when*. Jesus couldn't tell them *when*.

And his answer wasn't to rebuke the disciples for asking; instead, Jesus began with a warning: "Watch out that no one deceives you." (13:5) This theme of warning persists through Mark 13 – the same Greek word which is given as 'watch out' here, is translated as 'be on your guard' in verse 9 and simply 'be on guard' in verse 33.

Despite what the disciples had asked, Jesus didn't warn them about being on guard for the end, instead, he warned them about being beware of people who might deceive them.

Jesus said that the people who will try to deceive them will claim divine authority: *“Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.”* (13:6)

So we, like the disciples should watch out... but how is it that we can watch out?

Well, firstly, we need to test these things against scripture, and that’s not just to find a verse that supports what is being said, but we need to test what we’re told against the fullness of scripture. It pays for all of us to know the bible, to read the bible and to understand what we read.

And as we read the scriptures we can also look to the traditions of the church, and by that I don’t mean the various rituals that we have, but rather, what wise and prayerful Christians who have gone before us have thought about these things.

As well as the scriptures and our traditions, there is reason or even common sense: God has given us the ability to reason. You might remember back in 2012, there were predictions of the end of the world because the Mayan Calendar was running out. We know – for sure – now that it was wrong, but we have to think, did it ever make sense that the Mayans had knowledge of the End of the World, and so set up their calendar accordingly?

But thinking about the fulfilment of prophecy, ‘things to come’, the end of the ages, or the ‘End of Days’ to use the Jewish expression, is an interesting thing for Christians. There are those who will embrace it, wholeheartedly, who will focus on end times things, perhaps to the point of obsession – looking for signs, counting down days and so on. And then there are those who skip over it.

There is a long and rich tradition of predicting the end of the world: Wikipedia has a handy list of 206 predicted dates of the end times which have now all proved incorrect.

It’s easy – and terribly tempting – to mock such claimed prophecies. But I think the presence of such predictions reveals a human need, a human fear of the future. We long for certainty, and it is easy to be just like the disciples who came to Jesus and asked “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” (13:4)

So, rather than re-asking the disciples’ question “when will this be?” today, we need to focus on how Jesus’ answered them.

We need, Jesus says, to watch out, to stay on guard, so that we are not led astray, and then he goes on to talk about various things – calamitous things, world-shattering things – that will happen:

<sup>77</sup> *When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.* <sup>8</sup> *Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.* (13:7-8)

People often take Jesus reference to wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines as the signs that the disciples requested, when they asked “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” People track such things, and claim them as signs of the end – you know, the man on the street corner, with the sandwich board emblazoned ‘Repent! For the end is nigh’, but Jesus isn’t mentioning these things as signs of the end, he is telling the disciples – and us – of things that will happen before the end. Will continue to happen as they had throughout history. Things that we shouldn’t be deceived by and things that we shouldn’t be distracted by.

If you look at Jesus’ list, there’s nothing new there: wars and rumours of wars; nations rising against nations, and kingdoms against kingdoms; earthquakes in various places; famines. They are all facts of the world. They are not signs of the end of the age, but they are facts of the current age. Throughout human history, wars, famines and natural disasters have been with us.

And while they will always be with us, we as Christians are called to do what we can, to make peace, to feed the hungry, to cope with natural disasters. We must never ignore the things of this world and the suffering we see, but as we attend to the things of this world, to making peace, to feeding the hungry and tending the sick, we need to remember that those things are not the end in themselves, but rather the way in which we follow the example of Jesus, and serve God.

Jesus said “*These are the beginning of birth pains.*” They are the birth pains of the age to come: something that the world – and that we - must go through. Something the world must continue to go through, until the day God’s plan for creation is made complete.

The common theme to most discussion of the end of the days is fear and doom. Struggle against overwhelming odds. Destruction. Hopelessness. Death. That’s what we were all talking about in the days following 9/11. That’s what we were all talking about when the Covid-19 pandemic began at the start of last year. But they weren’t the end of the world. They aren’t the things that the scriptures point us to – instead, the End of Days is the end of fear and doom, the end of destruction, the end of hopelessness and end of death.

We, as followers of Christ, do not need to be beware of the End of Days, rather we need to be beware of those that focus on that time with proclamations of doom and disaster. We need to remain assured that Jesus, in his death and resurrection, has done all that is needed to save us. We just need to keep our faith in him, and be confident in the face of people and events that would lead us astray - whether they do so intentionally or not.

At the moment, things are improving. Covid restrictions are easing, borders are opening. One day soon, we may even be able to sing as a congregation! But there are many other concerns of our world and our lives. Natural disasters. Military conflicts. Economic conflicts. Environmental catastrophe. But Jesus said there will be wars and rumours of wars, do not be

*alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. <sup>8</sup> Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines.*

We must remember in the face of all this, that God has a plan for creation; there is an end in which God will bring about a new heaven and a new earth, one in which every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. We need to work diligently, as God's people toward that end: to share the good news of Jesus and to be examples to the world of God's kingdom.

We must not be distracted, and must not be lead astray by the things of the world.

Let's not worry about when things will happen, but always remember that God has a plan for creation, a plan for each one of us, and for all of us.

Amen.