

Watching and waiting

3 December 2017

Isaiah 64.1-9

Mark 13.24-37

We are living in strange and unnerving times.

The old rules that gave the world just a little bit of stability no longer appear to operate.

The President of the United States of America apparently has the time to trawl the web for tweets from a previously little-known far right group in the UK – so-called ‘Britain First’ ... and absurdly re-tweets their hate-filled propaganda, giving them credibility to his millions of followers on Twitter.

What is more, he has the audacity to be outraged when the British government challenges his actions.

And then we have had yet another test missile launched by North Korea, bringing nearer the time when North Korea has credible nuclear capability.

We were always told by those who supported nuclear arms that the way in which we keep the world safe in an age of nuclear armaments is through the doctrine of ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’. No one will ever start a nuclear war, so the theory goes, because both they and their opponents would be obliterated in the ensuing nuclear exchange.

With the acronym for Mutually Assured Destruction being MAD, the weakness of this doctrine rather ironically is that it tends to assume that those who have the capacity to use nuclear weapons are reasonably rational people. With Kim Jong-Un now in power in North Korea and President Trump in power in the US, this doctrine is now being tested as never before.

It's not that long ago when it felt as if the world was moving in a rather different direction – towards hope and liberation rather than away from it. At the end of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's we saw significant upheaval in the

geo-political landscape of our world. We saw the collapse of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe and we saw the fall of apartheid in South Africa. It seemed as if the world was on a new, hopeful trajectory.

But history doesn't work like that. It's not a gradual development from primitive to civilised, from division to cooperation, from chaos to order. Whenever order begins to assert itself, chaos seems to creep up through the cracks and take us by surprise.

And that's how life is at the more personal level as well. There are times and periods in our lives when everything seems to be going well. Relationships are strong, health is good, life is fulfilling. Life seems to be on the up. But life has this habit of throwing up challenges – relationships become fractured and difficult, health is dealt a blow, life becomes full of demands rather than satisfaction ... and we wonder what it is all about. The foundations of our well-being are threatened, and we find ourselves at a point of crisis, living with uncertainty.

Our two readings today both address communities that find themselves living in uncertain times, trying to make sense of it all ... and trying to make sense of God in the midst of the uncertainty.

Isaiah 64 is addressed to the people of Israel after they had returned from exile in Babylon.

The nation of Israel had been conquered by the super-power of the Babylonians in 597 BC. Over a period of 10 to 15 years large sections of the population – including all of their significant leaders – were taken away and forced to live in exile in Babylon. The city of Jerusalem was completely destroyed, including the temple.

In 539 BC the Persian king Cyrus overthrew the Babylonian empire and allowed the exiles to return home.

Try to imagine the situation of these exiles – elated at having been liberated and allowed to return to their homeland ... but then finding their homeland totally devastated – cities and homes in ruins –

If God was meant to be working in their lives, where was the evidence of his hand at work ... other than in judgment and punishment?

And Isaiah addresses these returned exiles ... and won't let them forget the lessons that they should have learned from their experience of exile – Isaiah clearly believed that all of this had happened only because the people of Israel had forgotten what it meant for them to live as the people of God in the world – they had forgotten God's ways of justice and mercy ...

He begins with a prayer of longing for God to break through the divide between heaven and earth and come to his people's assistance ... but then he offers them with a powerful image of how God is still at work in their lives ... and calling them to renewed trust:

The image of God as the potter, and we as the clay ...

64.8 – “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

God is the creative God, who may be at work to address flaws in our lives, but he is also at work to create something in us and out of us.

The encouragement is to trust the hands of God at work in our lives ... and to allow God to be God.

Trust as allowing God to shape us, in and through all that is happening in our lives.

There is a bigger picture that we will not always see from the inside, or from where we are now ... it is a bigger picture that will only be seen fully from God's perspective. The present lump of distorted and ugly clay can, in his hands become the beautiful jug.

One of the cities we visited in Australia was the city of Fremantle, just south of Perth in Western Australia. In Australian terms Fremantle is an historic city, and the main high street has retained all of the character of a traditional Australian street.

When we visited Freemantle, when you walked along the street and looked up you could see patches and lines of yellow on a number of these historic buildings.

Even the Town Hall had got patches of yellow on its tower.

None of this made sense, until you got to the bottom of the street and looked back up the street.

This is the picture that I took from the bottom of the street.

And this is the picture taken from the website of the Arts Festival that had sponsored this installation.

This was an amazing art installation as part of the Freemantle High Tide Festival by the artist Felice Varini.

[I have to confess to you that these pictures do indicate what a sad person I can be on holiday. We actually came at this totally unexpectedly from the bottom of the street, and saw this remarkable sight of these rings almost like ribbons around all of the buildings. And as we walked up the street and I began to take the photographs I said to Sally – “This will make a great sermon illustration!”]

It would be quite possible to see all of these yellow bits on the buildings and not realise what they all add up to – particularly if you never get to the bottom of the street and turn round and look back.

And it would be all too easy to live through our lives and never get any sense that God the potter is at work, making out of our lives something useful and beautiful and immensely valuable.

Our second reading comes at the end of one of the more difficult chapters in Mark's gospel – chapter 13.

The chapter begins with the disciples expressing their amazement at the splendour and beauty of the temple in Jerusalem. And Jesus responds to their amazement by warning them that within a generation all of the stones of the temple would be torn down and not one would be left standing on another.

For the disciples, as Jews, this not what they expected to hear. The whole of their faith to that point had been focused on the temple and all it represented of God's promises to his people.

Jesus went on to warn them that the world as they knew it was to be destabilized – the destruction of the temple, the besieging of Jerusalem, wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines ...

But throughout it all, the disciples were warned to 'Keep watch', to 'stay alert', to 'remain faithful' ... and were also warned that none of these were signs of the End and of the coming kingdom.

And all of this would have been particularly powerful for Mark's readers, because this was the world that they were living through.

Many interpreters of Mark now believe that Marks' gospel was first written in the years leading up to AD70.

In AD66 the Jewish people rebelled against the Roman rule and remarkably were able to chase the Roman authorities out of Jerusalem and declare self-rule. The Jews who led this revolt believed that this was all evidence that God was on their side ... and their belief was strengthened when they were able to dispel the first attempt by the Roman authorities to gain back control.

Remarkably, they were able to stay in control of Jerusalem and Judea until AD70, when the Roman forces came in overwhelming force, besieging Jerusalem and eventually conquering the city and razing it to the ground.

In the lead up to all of this, when Mark was writing his gospel, the question for Christians all over the empire, but particularly those living anywhere near Palestine and Galilee, was how should they respond to all that was happening in Jerusalem.

The Christians were not supporters of the Roman empire, not least because they persecuted the Christian community and because the emperors demanded the worship of their subjects. For Christians there was only one Lord – Jesus.

So was it right that the Jews – the people who saw themselves as God's chosen people – should engage in armed revolt against the Roman authorities? And was God validating their action by allowing them to see some military success in their revolt?

Was this even God's way of bringing in his kingdom upon earth? And should Christians become part of the revolt and lend their support to the armed resistance because this was bringing in God's kingdom?

And Jesus is quite clear ... and Mark ensures that the Christians he is writing for can have no question – don't be taken in by any of these false promises of the kingdom ... the world as you have known it – of Jerusalem and of the temple ... is all going to come to dust ... but none of that is about the coming of the kingdom.

What should the followers of Jesus be doing when all this is going on? They should be keeping watch and staying alert ...

We picked up the reading when Jesus had dealt with all of this stuff that was going to happen within a generation of his death. Jesus now turns his attention to the coming of the kingdom.

Firstly he says that when the kingdom of God does eventually break into this world no one will have any doubt about it. There won't just be a breakdown of order in the world, the whole cosmos will be turned upside down.

Jesus picks up images drawn from the Old Testament –

- sun darkened
- the moon will cease to give light
- the stars will fall

This is about a cataclysmic shaking of the foundations of the universe.

I think what Jesus is saying here is, if it's not clear whether what you are seeing is a sign of the end of the world or not, then it's not. When we reach that point it will be so self-evident that there will be no doubt ...

Then in the midst of all of this uncertainty, Jesus says that the one thing that remains constant are his words –

v 31 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.'

This is a call to discipleship – to holding onto the words of Jesus even as the world around us is shaking and uncertain.

But then Jesus says not to trouble ourselves with trying to predict the time when all of this will happen ... because nobody knows, except the Father.

v 32 – “No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

So even the agents who are going to be part of God’s bringing of this world to its final glorious completion – the Son of man who will come on the clouds, and the angels who will gather together God’s people from all corners of the universe – even these agents don’t know when this will happen ... only the Father.

And Jesus ends it all with a story of a householder who goes away and leaves his house in the charge of his servants.

He tells them, it seems, the night that he is going to return but presumably because of the vagaries of travel he doesn’t know exactly what time he is going to return. But he wants his household ready to welcome him home, whatever time of night he turns up – it might be early in the evening ... but it might not be until dawn.

And the challenge for the servants is to be alert and awake throughout the night.

It would be easy for the servants early in the evening to put off doing what they should be doing to get the house ready because they assume that the master won’t be here yet ...

But then the challenge into the early hours of the morning is the challenge of staying awake and alert – weariness sets in ...

And as it gets towards dawn a kind of resigned feeling that he probably isn’t going to turn up at all, so why bother?

The secret is not to get side-tracked by trying to predict when the master is going to return, but to get on faithfully doing what the master has asked you to do, so that whatever time he arrives (and that’s none of your business) you are doing what the master wants you to do.

And we are back to 'heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.' The call to watch and wait and to stay alert is to learn the art of being a faithful disciple of Jesus come what may.

Again we are back to trusting God with what he is best with – working on the big picture ... leaving God's business to God ...

... and getting on with the business of being the people that he has called us to be, whatever the circumstances, whatever the challenges.

The focus of my study during my sabbatical was to look at the early life of the church in the first two centuries of its life. What was the life of the early church like? What enabled it to grow and spread despite the opposition it faced?

One of the books I read was by the American Mennonite Alan Kreider. The book is entitled *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*.

Alan Kreider's argument is that the early church flourished not because it had a wonderful mission strategy, but because, come what may, the early believers simply got on patiently with being the kind of people that Jesus had called them to be – loving one another as Jesus had taught them, praying for those who persecuted them, refusing to retaliate when they suffered injustice, trusting in God's love and faithfulness ...