

18 November 2018

Daniel 12.1-3

Mark 13.1-8

Tower and Temple Fall to Dust

I am seen as something of a Neanderthal by some of my Baptist colleagues because I love many of the traditional hymns.

We are going to sing one of the hymns I love immediately after this sermon: All my hope on God is founded.

It is based on a hymn originally written by the 17th Century German Reformed Minister Joachim Neander. He was a prolific hymn writer. Probably his best known hymn is 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation.'

Now here is a bit of useless trivia for you at the beginning of a sermon. It has nothing to do with the theme of the sermon at all ... but I thought you might like to know!

Joachim Neander served as a minister in a church in Dusseldorf in Germany. He loved nothing better than to walk in the valley of the river Dussel. The beauty of the area was an inspiration for a number of his hymns.

Sometime after his death it was decided to name the valley after him. The word for valley in German is 'thal' – so the valley became known as Neanderthal. And it was in this valley in 1856 that the bones of an ancient species of human was discovered ... forever to be known as 'Neanderthal Man'.

So, loving this hymn, it is quirkily appropriate for me to be seen as something of a Neanderthal.

So why do I like this hymn?

I think because it is such a confident statement of trust in God in the midst of a world that often lets us down.

"Me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true."

And the hymn is not afraid to recognise that everything in this world around us that we humans build, however solid and permanent it looks and feels, can always come tumbling down.

“what with care and toil he buildeth,
tow’r and temple fall to dust.”

Tower and temple fall to dust!

This is a hymn that has its eyes open to the fragility of the world around us. This is a hymn that fully recognises the folly of human pride and earthly glory, that often overstretches itself . Yet it is a hymn that affirms a deep trust in God.

“But God’s power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.”

Of course a good hymn needs a good tune. And I also love the tune that we sing this hymn to.

It is a twentieth century tune, written by the English composer Herbert Howells. Herbert Howells knew tragedy in his life. His son died at the age of 10 in 1935 from spinal meningitis. When Herbert Howells received a request to write a new tune for this hymn, he is said to have written it one day over breakfast ... and named it after his late son, Michael.

Here was a man who knew all about the dark side of the change and chance of life through which we are guided – a man who knew what it was to have ‘tower and temple fall to dust.’

And yet the tune, along with the sentiment of the hymn, feels so positive and uplifting.

We live in a world where things can so easily crumble all around us ... where things to wrong. From the trivial to the profound.

Joe, our caretaker, showed me a video clip that had been forwarded on to him by a friend.

It’s of a minister in the States who is doing a trust exercise with some members of his congregation.

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With all the best planning things sometimes go wrong!

Tower and temple fall to dust.

Last Sunday morning I was not a little frustrated when our technology failed.

It was when I wanted to illustrate the impact of WW1 on this church community - losing 33 of its members and adherents. I had spent hours the previous week putting together this video clip. It was meant to play as we got out the 33 empty chairs.

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All the best laid plans of mice and men ... the technical gremlins got in the way

...

A rather more trivial experience of 'human pride and earthy glory ... tower and temple fall to dust.'

But, of course, the whole exercise was about illustrating the very worst end of this spectrum of tower and temple falling to dust ... the horrors of the First World War. So-called civilizations were hell-bent on destroying one another in a war in which, for the first time, human slaughter reached a mind-numbingly industrial scale.

Tower and temple fall to dust!

We think that the world that we are building is safe and secure ... until something happens ...

On the macro scale we only have to remember the twin towers in New York collapsing on 9/11, or the financial crisis of 2008 when the banking system of our world was shown to be built on a sham.

And everyone ... particularly the poorest are hit by the fall-out.

Tower and temple fall to dust.

When he wrote these words, Joachim Neander must have had in mind the incident that we read from Mark 13. The disciples – country folk come down to Jerusalem from Galilee – were simply awe-struck by the magnificence of the temple. They were, as the Americans would say, rubbernecking.

Its physical size, its splendour and its opulence would have been mind-blowing for them. Never mind all that it symbolized of God's promised presence with his people.

But for all its stunning architecture – for all its solid appearance – Jesus looks on this magnificent building and sees little more than a house built of straw.

The huge, massive stones, that were used to build this enormous structure, notwithstanding,— it was all a false security. Jesus saw the time when even this great building would be destroyed.

And, of course, that is exactly what happened just a few decades later.

The Jewish nation had the temerity to revolt against Roman occupation. They had a few short years of independence, but the might of the Roman empire came down on them, and the kind of devastation that we see today in the cities of Syria, was experienced by Jerusalem in AD70, with the temple being completely destroyed ... never to be re-built.

It was as if their world had collapsed around them.

Tower and temple fall to dust.

And Jesus goes on to say that that is not even the end of it. This is what you must expect the world to be like, he says – this broken, fallen, dysfunctional world. He talks about wars and rumours of wars. Of nations rising up against nations, of earthquakes and famines ...

But Jesus is not a doom-monger. He is a realist. He wants to prepare his followers for living in the real world, that is sometimes brutal. He wants to give them grit, persistence, heart to keep on going ... and to keep on going faithfully.

Above all, he wants them to know where they find their security in this broken, mixed up world.

And it is certainly not in human buildings and human institutions, like the temple – that portray the appearance of permanence and invulnerability, but ultimately can only ever be temporary and partial ...

Our ultimate security can only be found in God and in God alone.

As Neander expresses it in the hymn

“But God’s power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.”

Have you ever tried to find your way across a rock-strewn river, trying to use the rocks as stepping stones to get you to the other side in as dry a state as you can? You have to tread carefully with each step, only gradually putting your weight on any of the stones as they move and rock under your feet. You have to

find those rocks that have got a pretty solid foundation under them, and are not going to send you plunging into the river.

Life is about constantly feeling for that solidity under our feet – but too often what we end up depending on is nothing other than a false security. It holds us for a time ... but when life's deepest challenges come that security gives way under our feet and is shown up for what it is.

Our ultimate security can only ever be found in trusting in God's love alone – the vulnerable yet utterly dependable love that we see demonstrated in Jesus' death on the cross. Here Jesus displays both the utter dependability of God's generous love, and the extravagance and abandonment of true human trust in the Father.

Here, for Jesus, tower and temple have fallen to dust. There is nothing else and no one else to depend on ... but he throws himself into his Father's loving purposes, trusting the Father's wisdom – 'Not my will, but yours be done!'

We often talk about 'blind faith'. I think blind faith is the kind of faith showed by the man in the video who closed his eyes ... and ended up falling the wrong way!

Faith is about throwing ourselves onto God even when everything else has crumbled. But we do it with our eyes open, following Jesus, who has led the way for us. We fall into the unknown ... but with the assurance that the unknown is the utter dependability of God's love.

When tower and temple fall to dust ... there is God ... there is love.

But it is not just to trust that we are called, it is to hope.

Jesus, on one level, seems to be saying in this bout of realism – 'Be warned! things are just going to get worse and worse!'

But then he puts a new twist on this painful writhing that we will both witness and experience living in this world.

"These are the beginnings of birth pains."

Women are always eager to point out to us men when we are suffering from 'Man flu' that we don't know what real pain and suffering are like – because we never have to give birth.

And I am not sure that I am going to complain about that ... because I don't mind admitting that I am not very good with pain.

This image of birth pains reminds us that pain can be associated both with death and destruction, and with birth and new life.

And here Jesus is asking his disciples to open their eyes not just to the destruction that is going on around them, but also to see the new life that is able to emerge in the midst of that suffering and pain. In the midst of all of this, new life, new possibilities break into our world that are signs of God's coming kingdom.

The story of our world is not just a story of unremitting failure, of inevitable suffering, of unalterable fate constantly bearing bad tidings ... Intertwined with all of this there are also movements of new life and hope –

- of flowers blooming in deserts –
- of seeds germinating in barren soil –
- of movements of reconciliation and peace emerging in the midst of war and hatred –
- of gestures of welcome shown to the stranger in hostile environments
- of hands of forgiveness stretched out to enemies

This is about looking on the world with different eyes. Seeing with Jesus that what looks solid and dependable may be futile. But also seeing with Jesus that the pain and suffering around us may look as if it is all about death and destruction, but discovering that also within it all there are signs of hope and possibility – the birth-pangs of a new age.

And we may see in the suffering around us and within us the birth pangs of a new age, because with the crucified Jesus we discover that God enters into the suffering of the world in order to transform our world. God endures the cross in order to bring forth all the possibilities of resurrection life. So amidst all of the suffering of our world, there are to be found the birth pangs of God, as he suffers with us in order to bring transformation and hope.

And again Joachim Neander has expressed this well in his hymn:

“Evermore,
from his store,
new-born worlds rise and adore.”

So in this world where tower and temple so easily fall to dust, let us discover that

“All my hope on God is founded.”