

SERMON: Sunday – 14 November 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

The Birth Pains of New Creation

Psalm 16

Mark 13:1-8

(SLIDE) I want to begin with what is perhaps a troubling picture. It's a quotation by Adolf Hitler from 1928 in which he declares that his ideology and world view was Christian.

One may ask, what sort of Christ was he referring to. Not the Christ we know from the Gospels, the Christ who in Jesus of Nazareth could show no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.

What the quote from Hitler shows us is that people can abuse the name of Christ for their own ends. People can have a false, idolatrous idea of God and God's Kingdom. People can use religious language yet hold hatred in their hearts. People can speak well but act evil.

(SLIDE) People have been getting the wrong idea about religion since the advent of humankind. Think of how many conflicts have had a supposedly religious motive.

Perhaps this is why it is so important for wrong ideas to be demolished. Wrong ideas about God and God's way need to come tumbling down, need to be moved on from, in order to develop more healthy ones.

Jesus spent a lot of time trying to get across the right ideas about God to his disciples. And they seemed slow to get the message. Indeed they never got it in his short lifetime with them.

(SLIDE) The Temple at Jerusalem was a sight to behold. Solomon's Temple rebuilt by King Herod over 46 years had only recently been completed in the time of Jesus.

In declaring to his friends that every stone in the Temple will be thrown down, Jesus is forewarning his disciples that things are going to fall apart.

He's beginning to tell them to be on their guard, that they will be arrested and flogged and asked to testify. That there will be a time when it would feel like the whole world was falling apart - not unlike a time of war or climate crisis.

Jesus told them, "When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be

alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines” (7-8).

And we know from history how things panned out. The strife and conflict that the Temple bore witness to before being destroyed almost completely in the year 70CE.

Yet in the midst of all the destruction, Christ will be at work and Christ will be found. There will be hope in the midst of the hopelessness and light in the midst of the darkness. Something new is dawning.

Because verse 8 ends with the word of Jesus that:

“These are the beginning of birth-pains”.

Destruction is not just the end of something but the beginning of something new.

As the Psalmist declared centuries before:

“you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

In the midst of all the destruction and desolation there are the pangs of new birth, the pains preceding something new being born. The birth pains of new creation. Creator God creating good.

In 2018 Debie Thomas wrote a commentary on this Gospel reading from Mark that might as well apply to such a time as this or indeed any time.

The questions she raised in her commentary moved me. Three of the questions she posed were as follows:

(SLIDE) Why do I cling to permanence when Jesus invites me to evolve?
Am I willing to sit with the fact that things fall apart?(Things I love, things I built, things I cried and prayed and strived for.)
Can I embrace a journey of faith that includes rubble, ruin, and failure?

I wonder if we can sit with these questions for a moment and wonder at them.

What is it that makes me want to hang onto earthly things that are permanent

when God is inviting me to change up?

Can I live in a world where I will face loss, disappointment, unanswered prayer, and imperfection?

Can I keep going at such times?

These are questions that are worth meditating on and listening for the still, small voice of response.

Change is inevitable but you can trust me.

Don't be discouraged. Keep going. You can do it.

Jesus says, In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

And his brother James said, Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance (James 2:1).

Bricks and mortar won't last forever but love will. Jesus was/is more interested in loving enemies and loving neighbours than in bricks and stone or man made temples which too often can become places of idolatry, glorifying things created rather than the Creator of all things.

The things that endure are the things to build upon.

(SLIDE) Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

(1 Chronicles 16:34)

(SLIDE) Debie Thomas ended her commentary with a great word of hope which we can each take away with us today:

“In (any) troubling context, it's easy to despair. Or to grow numb. Or to let exhaustion win. But it's precisely now, now when the world around us feels the most apocalyptic, that we have to respond with resilient, healing love. It's precisely now, when systemic evil and age old brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we have to “hold each other tight” and allow the veil to part, the walls to fall. What's happening, Jesus promises at the end of this week's Gospel reading, is not death, but birth. Something is struggling to be born. Yes, the birth pangs hurt. They hurt so appallingly much. But God is our midwife, and what God births will never lead to desolation. Yes, we are called to bear witness in the ruins, but rest assured: these birth pangs will end in joy.”

The disciples never got the message in Jesus lifetime. It wasn't until his life

was thrown down and demolished, like the stones in the Temple would be, that something new began to dawn.

On the third day he rose again. And, in time, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message (Acts 10:40- 44).

We need the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to help us build a better world.

I want to finish with what I think is a relevant example of the kind of transformation that can come when people are inspired by God to do good things.

A recent newspaper article by George Monbiot compared America's joining of the Second World War with the sort of gigantic sudden change that is needed in the war we are currently losing against climate change.

In 1941 America diverted all manufacturing resources to the war effort to aid the allies in the resistance against the evil of Naziism.

They increased taxation, at one point the top rate reached 94%. They introduced rationing. They borrowed massively. Car production was banned as was house construction and household appliances. A national speed limit of 35mph was introduced to conserve fuel.

(SLIDE) Posters warned people "When you ride ALONE, you ride with Hitler! Join a car-sharing club TODAY", and asked "Is this trip really necessary?". They cautioned: "Waste helps the enemy: conserve material". Americans were urged to sign the Consumer's Victory Pledge: "I will buy carefully; I will take good care of the things I have; I will waste nothing." Every imaginable material – chewing gum wrappers, rubber bands, used cooking fat – was recycled.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/20/us-war-footing-1941-climate-emergency-earth-pearl-harbor>

Clearly there was a communal will to win the war by doing things very differently, and something very new was being birthed.

Could such a thing happen again in the war against climate change? It could and it'll take us all to do what we can.

So may the Holy Spirit inspire us to do so and bring to birth fresh love, joy and peace in our time and forever more, in the lives of our friends, our families, our neighbourhoods, our communities, our country and in every nation. In Jesus name. Amen.