

Mark 13:1-8

Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-25

Of all the well-known catchphrases on popular 'sit coms' of recent decades, perhaps some of the most memorable are those on *Dad's Army*, and especially Corporal Jones' frequent outburst – 'Don't panic! Don't panic!' There's even an episode where Jones has got himself stuck to the sail of a windmill which is turning round, and the cry comes out, 'Don't panic, Mr Mainwaring, don't panic!' The irony of it all, is that whenever Corporal Jones came out with his famous catchphrase, everything *was actually* in chaos, and he himself was the one who was most in a panic!

And in some ways, that catchphrase is an apt summary of what the Lord is saying to his disciples in today's Gospel reading – "When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, *do not be alarmed*; this must take place, but the end is still to come." Now it's important to note here that there's a *dual* focus to the question put to Jesus by the apostles and a *dual*

focus to the Lord's reply to it. Yes, the Lord is partly referring here ultimately to his Second Coming in glory. But there's also a more immediate and highly significant event in view here, which was to occur in their *own* generation; and this event was the forthcoming destruction of Jerusalem and in particular, the Temple.

This chapter of Mark actually opens with the disciples expressing their great admiration for the Temple and the Lord's prediction that it will be destroyed – something which did indeed occur at the hands of the Romans in the year AD 70. Now as Gentile, non-Jewish believers, it's easy for *us* to miss the significance of this event. But for the Jewish people, this would have been nothing less than a catastrophe. Because the Temple in Jerusalem was the central meeting place for worship – the place where people came to celebrate the great festivals of the Jewish religious calendar, a place of prayer and a place where sacrifices were constantly being offered for the atonement of sins. And above all, God was *present* there in a special way. So what

Jesus was predicting would happen to it would have come as a huge shock to the disciples – surely this couldn't really happen?

But there's a much deeper theological significance behind the destruction of the Temple. Because what Christ was about to accomplish through his death on the Cross – the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world - meant there would no longer be any need for the Temple and the whole sacrificial system which went on there. It's a truth which is expounded at some length in our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. There the author talks about the way in which, in the Jerusalem Temple, priests would offer sacrifices over and over again, but that these sacrifices could never take away the sins of the people. By contrast, the one single sacrifice of Christ on the Cross brings *real and complete* forgiveness of our sins, cleansing us and setting us on the path of holiness. And so, because of Christ's sacrifice, there's no need for any more sacrificial offerings to be made at the hands of priests in the Temple. We can now approach God in full assurance that we are forgiven

and cleansed through the Blood of Jesus – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We're no longer to live in a state of uncertainty as to whether God *is* really gracious and forgiving, but in the *certainty* that, in Christ, we can know God's forgiveness, and that through him, we permanently have access to the presence of the living God.

In fact, a further reason why the Temple is no longer needed is because Jesus Christ embodies the fullness of God *in himself*. The focus of God's presence is no longer in a *building*, but in a *person* – the Word-made-Flesh who lived among us, and who now reigns supreme over all things. As the Apostle Paul writes in Colossians, "He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God..." and "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell..."

So, Jesus' foretelling of the destruction of the Temple is a reminder to us that we mustn't put our trust in buildings and religious rituals. It's understandable that the disciples had a sense of pride in what was the third Temple on the same site

in Jerusalem – an impressive structure rebuilt well by king Herod. And today, yes, it’s certainly good to have particular places – sacred spaces – set aside exclusively for worship. And church buildings certainly serve to remind people that there is indeed more to life than the temporal; the great cathedrals of our nation, in particular, tend to fulfil this role as they often dominate the skyline for miles around them. But let’s remember that the Church of Jesus Christ, in the end, is *not* a building but *us* – *we* are the Church. Church is not so much a place we go to, but about who we are. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “.....*we* are the temple of the living God” (2 Cor 6:16). The emphasis now is not on the presence of God in particular buildings, but God present *in us* through the power of his Holy Spirit – as Paul again says to the Christians in Corinth, “Do you not know that *you* are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in *you*?” (1 Cor 3:16) If we stop to think about that for a moment, what an amazing truth that *is*.

Now alongside the matter of the imminent destruction of the Temple, the signs of the times

which Our Lord mentions here also apply to us, 2000 years on, as we await his return in glory. Because when *we* hear constantly of conflicts, earthquakes and famines around the world today, we might well ask, ‘are these signs that the end is near – that the Lord will return soon?’ It’s hard living with uncertainty, and so it’s natural that we would want to have some kind of indication as to when this will happen. In fact, the apostles themselves asked Jesus the same question – “Tell us, *when* will this be, and what will be the *sign* that all these things are about to be accomplished?” But what the Lord is implying here is that the disciples were really asking the wrong question. *They* were concerned about ‘*when*’ these things would happen – ‘what are the signs?’ to look out for, is their primary concern. But what *Jesus* is saying is that what we should *really* be asking is, ‘How should we live in the light of such prophecies?’ And one thing we should do is beware of false teachers. There are many throughout the course of Christian history, and still in the Church today, who teach what is contrary to the word of God – so we need to be grounded in God’s word and hold fast to

it. Our minds need to be transformed by it, so that we're not led astray.

And as the author of Hebrews reminds us, whilst we await the Lord's return in glory, we're not to become lazy; rather, we should all the more be encouraging "one another to love and good deeds....." Those to whom the Letter was originally addressed were Christians of a Jewish background who were facing persecution – they felt increasingly under pressure to give up following Jesus and go back to their old familiar religious traditions and beliefs. But the message to them here is that, far from allowing themselves to become disinterested, on the contrary, they are to be active in God's service, and "all the more as you see the Day approaching" – that's to say, as they wait in eager expectation of Christ's Second Coming and the final judgement. And the same message applies to us today.

The reality of judgement is something which is anticipated in the prophet Daniel's vision of the end time in our Old Testament reading. At the general

resurrection at the end of time, some will rise to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Deliverance is promised for all whose names are written in God's book of Life. So, we need to ensure that *our* names are in the book of Life, by committing our lives fully to Christ and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Back in 1939, the government produced a poster in preparation for the Second World War to raise the morale of the British public, and it's undergone something of a revival in recent years; it simply says, 'Keep calm and carry on', and there have been endless contemporary variations on the theme. But as we await Christ's return in glory, the message for us *isn't* simply, 'Keep calm and carry on' or 'don't panic' (for that matter), but rather 'Keep calm, stand firm in the Faith and trust in Jesus'. May we keep our eyes focused on *him* as we journey on.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, as we continue on our earthly pilgrimage, help us to be active in your service as we go about our daily lives. In the strength of your Holy Spirit, may we stand firm in the Faith and not be led astray by what is contrary to your word; as we wait in joyful hope for the coming in glory of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.
Amen.