***‘THE STONE OF HOPE’***

**NPMC – March 15, 2020**

**(Mark 13.1-8; 1 Peter 2.4-10)**

**LENT THREE**

**INTRO**

One fine scholar, writing about Mark 13 says this: *‘Preaching and teaching from this chapter is not for the faint of heart (is that why Patrick and Susanne left it for the guest speaker?). There are enough end-time catastrophes, global disasters, public trials, familial betrayals, warnings of persecution and darkened heavens to make even the sturdiest soul quiver. Yet the images here have seeped into our consciousness. We are every bit as fascinated as we are fearful of Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse.’ [1]*

I don’t know about you but it seems to me that those who are most dogmatic about chapters like Mark 13 don’t often really know what they are talking about.

Unfortunately, interpreters often overlook Jesus’ instructions, later in this chapter, not to be to calculating about calendars and schedules. Only the Father knows the times and the seasons, our business is to be alert and faithful.

This reminds me of a George Carlin routine in which he expresses astonishment over those opinion polls on TV networks like Fox and CNN where some debatable question is posed and people are invited to phone in and vote their views. ‘Did you ever notice,’ said Carlin, ‘there’s always, like, 18% who vote, ‘I don’t know.’ It costs a dollar to make those calls, Carlin says, ‘and they’re voting, ‘I don’t know.’

Carlin imagined some guy, seeing the question on TV and saying to his wife, ‘Honey, give me the phone.’ He shouts ‘I don’t know’ into the phone and then says proudly to his wife, *‘Sometimes you have to stand up for what you believe you’re not sure about!’*

But, just before we go to Jerusalem and Mark 13 to see what we do know, let me take you on a side-tour to Scotland (to something you’ll probably not see on one of Rick Steve’s travelogues). Several years ago, Claire and I were on a sabbatical trip to the British Isles and as part of our travels we spent two weeks in Scotland. I loved the country. One day we found ourselves in Stirling. It is northeast of Edinburgh and is considered the gateway to the Scottish highlands.

Stirling is where William Wallace -Braveheart (impersonated memorably by Mel Gibson) fought the English. It went badly for him, if you’ve seen the movie. Stirling is dominated by the castle high on a hill overlooking the city. So we joined a group touring the ‘magnificent pile of stones.’ Near the castle is the Church of the Holy Rude. In case you’re wondering, Holy Rude was a medieval term for the Cross of Christ’s crucifixion. The church dates back to the 12th century though this version was built in the 15th century. Mary, Queen of Scots was crowned there in 1543. Prince Henry was christened in this church in 1594. James Vl was crowned in that room.

**[SLIDE] Church of the Holy Rude, Scotland**

As we stood in the sanctuary, our guide said: *‘Do you see that brick line there? He pointed to a line from floor to ceiling right down the middle of the church. This is one of our most painful stories. During the turbulent 17th century when there were so many political and religious troubles, the congregation was split into factions. An extreme and bigoted pastor, James Guthrie, refused to accept his more moderate colleague.*

*After trying to resolve the conflict for a long time, the town council finally solved the problem by building a wall across the church, dividing it. They did this in 1656. One church became two separate churches, the east church and the west church. They worshipped back to back until 1936. For 280 years they worshipped, divided. Finally, in 1936 the wall came down.’*

***What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’***

**FACING THE TEMPLE**

**[SLIDE] West wall of the Temple in Jerusalem**

In our Gospel text, Jesus is making his third visit of the week to the Temple. As Susanne pointed out last week, this latest visit has Jesus offering a sharp critique of the Temple establishment highlighted by the story of the poor widow, a victim of a religious system that oppresses people like her.

However, as Jesus and his disciples come out of the Temple, they are moved to exclaim:

***What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’***

As someone once said, in another context, his disciples ‘never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity.’ It’s as if the Temple cleansing and the critique of some its oppressive practices, has gone right over their heads.

Now it is true, this Temple was a pretty impressive piece of architecture. Josephus, the sometimes reliable, sometimes notoriously unreliable 1st century historian, described the Temple in glowing terms:

*A perimeter circumference of two-thirds of a mile. Its marble walls were 150 feet high and were constructed of blocks weighing many tons. The outside of the building was decorated in white marble. The eastern front and part of the side walls were plated with gold. The gleaming white marble and stunning metal work made the Temple flash in the Middle Eastern sun and dominate the cityscape.* [2]

Only one of the walls still stands, the so-called Wailing Wall. In one of the tunnels along this wall you can see a single ashlar that is 45 feet long and weighs 570 tons. [**SLIDE – WAILING WALL ashlar]**

But, Jesus is not impressed. To him it symbolized the socio-political structures of the temple state and of official Judaism.

Jesus urges his disciples to see past the impressive exteriors. The ones who honour God are not the rich patrons, but the poor widow who gives sacrificially. What truly honours God is not a great temple filled with religious activity, but a community of disciples who love God and love each other (12.28-44). Jesus looks past the impressive stones and sees desecration and doom.

We should not be unaware of the political ferment going on at the time of Mark’s Gospel being written, sometime between 65-70 CE. In 66, some Jewish Zealots had started an armed uprising, and wonder of wonder, had driven the Roman army out of Jerusalem. They urged all true patriots, including the Christian community in Palestine to join the insurrection. Mark quotes Jesus’ teaching on all such invitations to revolutionary violence. *Beware of false messiahs and their wars. They bring no peace; misery and death follow in their wake.*

In 70 CE the Romans responded with the full force of their military. In the end they set fire to the Temple and destroyed Jerusalem. Thousands died and thousands more were enslaved, many carted off to Rome where they perished in the forum, fodder for gladiators and wild beasts.

**FACING OUR TEMPLES**

Well, we know about impressive edifices. For 2000 years Christendom has specialized in building magnificent structures and institutions, often at great cost to the humble people, the poor and the widows, and the indigenous peoples of the lands Christendom was claiming.

Our churches as institutions, at least in the west, seem to be crumbling into dust – under the siege of indifference, sometimes hostility, often the subject of caricature and ridicule. And not all of it is undeserved.

Robert Capon says somewhere that churches should have on their church signs: GONE OUT OF THE RELIGION BUSINESS.

**STORY –** St Francis and the pope. The pope took Francis on a tour of the opulent basilica. Alluding to Acts 3.6, the pope boasted, *‘No longer need we say, ‘silver and gold have I none.’*  The humble Francis replied, *‘Yes, but neither can the church say, ‘rise up and walk!’*

**STORY** – A friend, a Presbyterian pastor lost 50 members of his congregation when he spoke out against the Gulf War in 2002.

Perhaps - ***What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’*** need no longer be our refrain.

**BIRTH PANGS**

But – don’t miss the word of hope in 13.8…

***With these things the birth-pangs of the new age begin.***

There will be all kinds of calamity yet the metaphor is hopeful, ***‘This is but the beginning of birth-pangs.’***  Birth pangs suggest that the new is on the horizon. Those of you who have been present at the birth of children know that the culmination of all those birth pangs is something marvellous, something wonderful, a gift filled with promise and hope.

In one sense, Jesus’ prediction was off the mark. Hundreds of the stones are still there, two millennia later piled on top of one another. But he was speaking, in metaphor, about his death, about a truer way of connecting with God. He surrendered his life just outside those impregnable walls. As 1 Peter tells us, he becomes a living stone, the cornerstone for us. Architects know that the correct lines for a building are derived from a perfectly squared-off cornerstone from which the others stones all find their true bearings. Peter quotes Isaiah in which the cornerstone stands for justice, and proclaims this justice is now personified in Jesus. Thus he is the living stone and we who are being built in to a spiritual house take our moral cues from Jesus. We ask, ‘How can our lives and actions fit in with what God is doing in the world through Jesus?

**LIVING STONES**

*Ivan Illych, the Austrian philosopher and provocative thinker, was once asked, ‘Is it more effective to change society through violent revolution or gradual reform? He replied,* ***‘Neither. If you want to change society you must tell an alternate story.’***

**STORY – A Bible study in MacDonalds.**

John Pentland, a UC pastor from Calgary was in Chicago for the Festival of Homiletics. On Sunday morning he and some friends went to Trinity United Church of Christ to hear Jeremiah Wright, well-known as Obama’s pastor.

The first service was full (3000 people) so the usher suggested they go across the street to MacDonald’s for breakfast. So they went, ordered and sat down. Across from them they noticed a group of men huddled in conversation with Bibles in front of them.

Intrigued, Pentland went over, introduced himself and asked what was up. One man explained, ‘This MacDonald’s used to be filled with drug dealers influencing all our kids. So we came here and started a Bible study group. The drug dealers left.’ Pentland concludes, ‘Who would have thought the Bible could be used as a security system! [3]

**STORY – Oscar Romero, witness to the truth.**

In 1977 Oscar Romero became archbishop of San Salvador. He was seen as a safe choice, one who would not disturb the status quo. El Salvador was ruled by a vicious military junta, supported by U.S. money.

But no one could forsee that he would become a voice for the voiceless – the poor and downtrodden – and a voice that would earn denunciation from fellow bishops, and the hatred of the rich and powerful who ran the country for their gain.

By 1980 the country had reached the point of explosion. Death squads and the military freely suppressed and murdered all opponents, real or imagined.

On March 23, 1980, Bishop Romero appealed directly to the military: ‘*We are your people. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear the voice of the man commanding you to kill, remember instead the voice of God, ‘Thou shalt not Kill.’ In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people whose cries reach up to heaven…I beg you, I command you, stop the repression.’*

The next day, March 24, 1980 - forty years ago this month - as he was saying mass, he was killed by a single shot fired from the rear of the church. [4]

**[SLIDE] Statues at Westminster Abbey**

In 1998, the statues of ten modern day martyrs, was unveiled. The martyrs are drawn from every continent and many Christian denominations and represent all who have been oppressed or persecuted for their faith. Among them stands a statue of Oscar Romero, faithful witness to the truth. **A living stone.**

PRAYER – ROMERO

“It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction

of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of

saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession

brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church’s mission….

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one

day will grow. We water the seeds already planted

knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects

far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of

liberation in realizing this.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,

a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s

grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the

difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not

messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

Living stones!

AMEN

Notes

[1] Wilhelm, Dawn Ottoni – Preaching the Gospel of Mark (p.220).

[2] Josephus – The Jewish Wars (chapter 5).

[3] Pentland, John – Fishing Tips (p.26).

[4] Ellsberg, Robert – All Saints (p.131).