

Homily for Pentecost 25

Mark 13:1-8

'Living without alarm in alarming times'

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

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INTRODUCTION

Some of you may remember in the 1970s in Adelaide, there was a prediction of a tsunami which was to destroy our lovely city.

The prediction had a religious element.

The person or people involved felt strongly about various social changes in the state, and predicted God's coming judgment on the city.

The ever-dramatic premier Don Dunstan famously stood at the end of the Glenelg jetty in defiance of the tsunami which never came, (I'm not sure if he was wearing his pink shorts or not).

According to reports, There were people who sold homes at Glenelg and moved.

There were some businesses which boarded themselves up and closed.

This little local example is, of course, part of much wider phenomenon,

of people *predicting* devastating events, and others *reacting* to those predictions in various ways.

Then, there are disastrous events which **do** happen, Which people don't predict.

In our very day, Wars, famines and earthquakes are happening in our world, just like Jesus talks about.

So, what are we to make of all this?

How does Jesus teach his disciples to live in the midst of it?

Where do we find encouragement and hope?

How do we live without alarm in alarming times?

These are the sorts of questions we'll think about as we delve into our text today.

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A DOOMED TEMPLE

Jesus has been in and out of the temple in the lead up to this text.

He inspected the temple,
He cleared the temple out,
He'd been teaching in the temple,
just before this he had commended the widow for her offering to the temple treasury.

Now he's *leaving* the temple,
And although at first that seems like a simple, unimportant detail,

As we read on, we find that means he's leaving for good.

He doesn't come back to the temple after this,
And there seems to be a shift happening here,

From the old temple to the new,
In Jesus himself,

Where the discerning hearer understands that the glory of the Lord is departing the temple
once and for all,

And to see the true glory of God you look to Jesus,
But I'm getting ahead of myself.

As Jesus leaves the temple,
one of his disciples expresses how impressed he is with the size and magnificence of the
temple.

'Look teacher, what large stones and what large buildings'.

He wasn't exaggerating, by the way.

Historians and archaeologists have written about how the stones of the temple were far
bigger than anything used in the pyramids, for example,

So much so they have trouble working out exactly how they got them into place.

This was an impressive structure.

And yet Jesus says,
It's all going to be destroyed.

*'Not one stone will be left upon another;
All will be thrown down' (v 2).*

Why does Jesus say this?

Well,
In the first place he's making a prophetic pronouncement,
As to what's going to happen to the temple,
Because God's people have turned away from him and the inner workings of the temple
have become corrupt.

It was supposed to be *'a house of prayer for all nations'*,
But they had *'made it into a den of robbers'* (Mark 11:17).

But that Jesus says this specifically to this disciple's enthusiasm,
Also suggest there's a contrast being made here,
As to what's **lasting** in this world,
And what will **pass away**.

In the words of the disciple,
you get the feeling that he thinks this temple is so magnificent,
That surely nothing could even happen to it.

Perhaps there's a sense of security and safety in this.

Jesus wants to say then,
that everything made with human hands,
Even those things God has instructed them to build,

Everything made with human hands will pass away.

We need to be very careful about placing our trust in the things of this world.

Near the end of this chapter he'll say that even *'heaven and earth will pass away,
But my words will not pass away'* (Mark 13:31).

And just before we move on,

we need to note that what Jesus said happened.

In AD 70,
Maybe 40 years or so after Jesus spoke these words,

The Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Roman armies,

Jesus prophetic prediction did, in fact, come true.

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THE QUESTION OF WHEN

So Jesus leaves the temple,
and heads over to the Mount of Olives,
where he and his disciples can see the temple now from another perspective.

Four of his close disciples ask him privately,
*'when will this be,
And what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?'*

Now as we work through Jesus response,
we'll see that's he not really too keen on answering their question,
At least not in the way they wanted.

That's usually a sign that your question was not a great question, by the way,
If Jesus does that.

In the disciple's question,
Is something of this deep human desire to ***know the future***,

To have a timeline,
on what's going to happen, when.

It's true isn't it?
That one of the very simple realities of our human life,
Is that we do not know the future?

We do not know what is going to happen in our own life,
In that of our loved ones,
In the world generally.

History is full of surprises.

People assume one thing is going to happen,
And it just doesn't work out that way.

This lack of certainty about the future is a great source of human angst and anxiety and fear
in all sorts of ways.

Notice again too,
How they go to Jesus privately.

This is normal in the Gospels,
very often as Jesus teaches big crowds in one way,
then gives the clearer and more specific teaching privately to his disciples.

But I wonder whether the disciples here also had that very human desire for 'insider
information'.

To be in on the secret about what's going to happen.

This can be part of the attraction of those who make dramatic predictions of things in the
world,

We want to be in on it.
We don't want to miss out.

So how does Jesus respond?

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WARNING AGAINST DECEPTION

*"Jesus began to say to them,
'Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say "I am he!" and
they will lead many astray.'"*

So the disciples want to know the **when**,
But Jesus doesn't really respond to that.

They ask about signs,
He doesn't really respond to that either in the first place.

Instead,
He shifts the focus of the disciples.

He says,

don't focus so much on signs and timelines of when big things will happen in the world,

But focus on how you're *living* and *responding* in the midst of it.

And his *main* concern here,
is that when dramatic things take place in the world,
his disciples are not lead astray or deceived,
by pretenders, false teachers,
and those who would claim to be the one sent from God with all the answers.

Jesus warns us ahead of time,
that there will always be figures and movements like this.

And the implication here is that dramatic events in the world do make us vulnerable to
getting lead astray.

It's worth taking these words of our Lord seriously and in a sober-minded way.

Most of us have stories that come to mind when we hear this.

Perhaps we have family members or friends who have got caught up in cults or sects which
sound very much like what Jesus warns about here.

Or we think of more high-profile examples where a person claiming some mission from God
manages to take people along,
And they even sell homes,
Leave jobs and families,
Etc,
Often ending in a big mess.

We've read these stories or seen them on television,

They happen.

And the temptation when you hear these stories can be to think,

How could anyone be so stupid and gullible?

How could they ever fall for someone who is now be shown to be a complete charlatan?

But I think we do well,
to be a little more sober-minded,

Not to think we're above temptation and deception,

We take Jesus' caution seriously,

we cultivate spiritual vigilance and alertness as individuals and as a Church.

'Beware that no one leads you astray'.

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ENCOURAGEMENT NOT TO BE ALARMED

Then Jesus does come to talk a little,
about things which sound more like the 'signs' they were looking for.

But even then, notice,

He says almost the *opposite* of what they probably expected,

And even the opposite of what we sometimes assume Jesus is saying.

He says,

*'When you hear of wars and rumours of wars,
do not be alarmed;
This must take place,
But the end is still to come.*

*Nation will rise against nation,
And kingdom against kingdom,;
There will be earthquakes in various places;
There will be famines.*

This is but the beginning of the birth pangs'.

So here are the disciples asking about signs and now they say,
'Okay,
Wars, famines,
Earthquakes,

Now Jesus we're getting to some real signs right!'

Here are some dramatic, external events in the world that we can observe and interpret and be in on what's happening!

Well,

Not quite.

What does Jesus actually say?

'Don't be alarmed',
When these things happen.

Don't let them whip you up into a spiritual over-enthusiasm and panic.

'These must take place',
Jesus says,

'The end is not yet',

*'There **will be** earthquakes',*
*'There **will be** famines',*

There will be,
as long as we live in this world,
all sorts of terrible tragedies and disasters going on all around us,
It's just the way it is.

Are these signs?

Well yes and no.

They're signs of the broken and decaying creation we live in,
They're signs of the sinfulness of humanity,

They're signs of our need to repent and turn to God for mercy,

But not necessarily imminent signs of the end of the world,
Or of any other imminent intervention by God.

So in the midst of it,
Jesus says,
be calm,
Keep your head,
Don't panic,

Your daily newspaper or news feed should not alarm you as a Christian,
Jesus said this is how it was going to be,

Don't be alarmed,

Don't be frightened.

It's but *'the beginning of the birth pangs'*,
Jesus says.

Now,
isn't that an interesting picture Jesus uses,
The 'birth pangs'.

It's one that's used repeatedly in the Bible as an image of pain and suffering.

But the pain leading up to birth is of a particular kind and worth thinking about.

When Jesus mentions this here in this context not being alarmed,
I can't help but think back to antenatal classes my wife Kim and I did at some stage at the
hospital.

Where they need to instruct first time parents,
That when the construction first come,

Don't over-react,
Don't panic,
Don't use up all your nervous energy in the first hour or two,

And maybe that's all directed at the dads more than the mums!

Despite what the movies would have us believe,

The advice when birth pangs begin is generally,
to stay at home for a while,
to make sure this is the real thing,

and then even if it is,
to try to rest if at all possible between contractions in the early stages,

Because as the seasoned campaigners know,

More often than not you're in for a long haul.

As intense as the pain can be even at the beginning,
It is only the beginning,

So don't be alarmed.

This is the picture of how Christians are to be in this world.

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THE HOPE OF NEW BIRTH

But then in this picture of the beginning of the birth pangs,

There's something more,

In fact,

There's also good news hidden away here.

Because if the pain of the sufferings and disasters and tragedies of this world,
is for Jesus comparable to birth pangs,

What does that mean about where all this is heading?

The implication is,

That with God,

it's heading to something *new*,

Something *joyful*,

Something *wonderful*,

New life!

In this little passing reference to birth pangs Jesus is giving a glimpse,
of what God is doing in this world.

The wars,

The famines,

The earthquakes,

The pandemics,

Are not the decline of God's creation into a slow, agonizing death that ends in nothingness.

No,

According to Jesus,

While they are painful,

They are painful like labour pains,

They are the beginning of something more like a birth,

The promise we have as God's people is of a *renewal* of all things (Matt 19:28),

'A new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1),

Jesus says,

'Behold, I make all things new' (Rev 21:5).

As the Apostle Paul looks with hope to the future,

Considering that the present sufferings of this age are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed,

He says,

'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now' (Rom 8:18-23).

As Jesus mentions the birth pangs,

There is a ticking time bomb of gospel joy here about what the future holds.

And yet,

The great irony,

Is that the greatest labour pains of all will happen,

Not as the temple is destroyed,

Not even in wars and earthquakes,

But as Jesus himself goes to his death.

Jesus said elsewhere,

'Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. ²¹When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²²So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.' (John 16:20-22)

The one who here predicts the end of the temple,

Will himself meet his own end on the cross.

And as our second reading from Hebrews reminded us,

In doing this,

He offered himself for us as the single, once for all,

Sacrifice for sin (Heb 10:12).

He died for all our sins,

Including our misplaced fear in the face of all that happens around us in this world,

Our misplaced love of things which are passing away,

Our misplaced trust in things other than God himself.

He died and rose again to open up that new and living way into God's presence,

And to give us confidence to draw near to God through his shed blood.

As you are joined to him in baptism and by faith,

You are made into living stones in his spiritual temple,

Where we live in hope,
awaiting out final redemption.

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CONCLUSION

There will always be predictions of great disasters on the horizon,
The end of the world,
And people claiming to be the answer to all of life's questions.

And indeed, Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.

But let us now get carried away with the when and the signs,

Instead,
as Jesus' disciples let us listen to his words,
Trust in him,

And so live without alarm,
even in alarming times.

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake, Amen.