

Our Place in God's Unfolding Story

Second Sunday before Advent 2018: Mark 13.1-8 and Hebrews 10.11-25

Last week was an extraordinary one in our nation's political life. Reflecting on the events of the last few days invites echoes of today's Gospel reading. It may be my strange imagination, but I can imagine a supporter of the prime minister saying something like this:

Be careful no one leads you astray. When you hear of leadership challenges and no confidence votes do not be alarmed, and when you hear of deals or rumours of deals, look at the fine print carefully. A withdrawal agreement must happen, but the end of re-negotiating our relationship with the EU is still to come. This is but the beginning of Brexit.

What is beyond question is that we live in turbulent times. That's true, not only for our own country, but for so many other places around the world. Think of Yemen, think of Syria and the Middle East, think of the United States, think of Russia and its ambitions.

And that sense of turbulence and change is not only about politics. It's about the deep cultural and social changes we are living through. Think of the changes taking place in how society understands gender and personal identity. Think of the communications revolution and the all the challenges and opportunities presented by digital media.

The world is in flux and we have little idea where things will land. How do we orientate ourselves when the landscape is shifting all round us?

The writings now collected together in the New Testament were also addressed to a Church witnessing a world in turmoil. Today's Gospel begins with Jesus talking about the stones of the Jerusalem Temple being torn down, so that not one stone will remain upon another. By the time Mark's Gospel was being circulated at the end of the first century that destruction had come to pass. The Jewish revolt against Roman rule in 66AD, although initially successful, led to terrible reprisals from the empire. The Jews themselves then descended into a civil war between moderates

and radicals. The Romans finally laid siege to Jerusalem and, in 70BC, sacked the city and destroyed the Temple. It was a brutal revenge and changed Judaism for ever.

Elsewhere the first Christian communities, especially in Rome, found themselves subject to sporadic outbreaks of persecution, notably under the emperor Nero in 64AD. Everywhere the empire and its power and wealth seemed triumphant.

Consequently Mark's Gospel, in presenting Jesus' warnings about wars and rumours of wars, was very much directed at contemporary experience. But Mark's purpose was not simply to suggest that Jesus' predictions had come true. Rather the crucial message that he and other New Testament writers wanted to underline was this: in a world of competing narratives about humanity's identity and purpose, don't be led astray, trust in the story that has Christ at its heart.

What Mark and the other Gospel writers are seeking to do is place the turmoil and uncertainty of history within a bigger story. As the theologian Sam Wells suggests, that bigger story can be thought of as a five act drama. The first act is creation. It is the drama of God calling the world into being and setting its creative processes in motion. The second act is the story of Israel. It's the drama of an awakening spiritual consciousness in which God and his people are called into a relationship of love and trust. Yet in this act there is also tragedy as God's people turn their back on the creator and live for themselves alone.

The third act is the story of Jesus. He comes as the one in whom heaven and earth, God and humanity, are reconciled and made one. It too is a story of rejection, leading to the cross, but this act ends, not with death but resurrection.

The fifth and final act is where the promise of a new creation is fulfilled. In this part of the drama God comes to his people, heaven descends to earth and all is made new. God himself wipes away all tears from our eyes and pain and sorrow and crying are no more. That's where this drama ends.

First act - creation; second act - Israel; third act - Christ, fifth act - creation fulfilled.

And the fourth act? In this unfolding drama the fourth act is now, and you and I are called to take our place on the stage.

We know how the drama has gone in the first three acts. We know the themes and the plot lines. We also know where the drama will end. Our part is to live out our role in ways that are faithful to God's unfolding story and which lean into the future that we know is coming in act five.

Yes, say Jesus and the New Testament writers, from the human perspective the world is turbulent and uncertain. But don't be led astray by false accounts of what matters and the wealth and power of empires as they rise and fall. Trust in God's story of love, forgiveness and salvation. Faithfully play the part God has prepared for you. In the words of the letter to the Hebrews:

Hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

And what does holding fast look like? The letter urges us to 'provoke one another to love and good deeds', to 'meet together', and to 'encourage one another'. In other words, holding fast, being faithful, is not just about what we believe, it's about how we choose to live in the light of what we believe. The disciplines of prayer, forgiveness, confession, praise, breaking bread, attending to Scripture, hospitality, generosity and service of others, are not simply an activity list for bored Christians. They are the virtues we commit to practice with the intent that they will form our character, enabling us to play our part in act four of God's five act drama.

So, in a time of uncertainty, the Gospel says to us again this morning, don't be distracted by wars and rumours of wars. Don't be led astray by fear and anxiety, by suspicion or pride. Don't be led astray by the empires of this world, with their different stories about what matters, for they will rise and fall. Instead, hold fast to our hope without wavering. Provoke one another to love and good deeds. Meet together. Encourage one another. Take up your place in God's unfolding story.

Canon Dr Andrew Braddock, Gloucester Cathedral