33rd Sunday in O.T. 2024

On Ash Wednesday, 2003, Pope John Paul 11 sent an urgent message to the President of the United States, George W Bush. His purpose was to avert the US-led invasion of Iraq. The core of the Pope’s message was “War is always a defeat for humanity." The Pope saw clearly the disastrous outcome should the United States go to war against Saddam Hussein. President Bush was pointedly asked, “do you realise what you will unleash?” The Pope believed that such an invasion would cause civil war in Iraq, and result in many deaths, as well as causing great turmoil in the Middle East. He also pointed out that while it is easy to enter into a war, it is much more difficult to withdraw from one. As we know today, all that Pope John Paul predicted on that fateful Ash Wednesday in 2003, came to pass.

As for President Bush, his astounding response to the Pope was that he was convinced that his course of action “was God’s will”! From the beginning of time, humanity has consistently failed to listen to the prophets – how true the accusation of scripture, *“The* *Lord has persistently sent you all his servants the prophets, but you have not listened, or paid attention” (Jer.24:4).*

Jesus was one such prophet; again and again he warned the people of his day that the religious and political paths they were pursuing would lead to total disaster – remember his lament over Jerusalem, *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you….your house will be left to you desolate”* *(Mt.23:37-39).* And again, speaking about the Temple he predicted, *“You see these great buildings? Not a single stone will be left on another: everything will be destroyed” (Mk.13:2).*  Jesus, in describing such devastation used the language of cosmic catastrophe, *“the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, the stars will come falling from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken”.* He was not predicting the end of the world but was predicting the end of “their” world, the one with which the people of the time were familiar.

Today’s Gospel passage concludes with an enigmatic comment, *“But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it”.* But forty years after Jesus’ prediction, for St Mark, the author of the Gospel passage, that “day and hour” had now come - their world was being totally devastated. Christians were being mercilessly persecuted; a Roman army had savagely crushed a rebellion in Palestine, burnt the Temple, sacked Jerusalem, leaving *“not a stone upon another”,* and thousands of the inhabitants had been slaughtered. Many were anxiously asking, “How is this going to end?” Some thought it might even be the end of the world, some might even have wished that it was the end of the world – it was certainly the end of an era.

The question is “does this Gospel passage have any message that is relevant for us?” As we survey our times, we see a world not dissimilar to that about which St Mark wrote. The poor, the innocent, and the vulnerable, are the victims of war and destruction, and of so many unspeakable crimes against life, as well as experiencing, directly or indirectly, the tragic effects of climate change. This we hear of day-after-day, yet prophets continue to be ignored – Pope Francis, quoting Pope John Paul 11, declares again and again, “War is always a defeat for humanity”, but who is listening?

Many may read today's Gospel as a “doom and gloom” passage, one simply predicting the end of the world. However, when we tease out what St Mark is saying, we discover a very consoling message of hope. Mark knew that his community, in the midst of bitter suffering, needed reassurance, and although he didn't know exactly how the future would turn out, he writes with deep conviction about the triumph of Jesus over suffering and death. He proposed to his listeners that they evaluate world events through the lens of the death and resurrection of Jesus. He challenged his community, and he challenges you and me, to hold on to faith, and to see the anguish of ruined hopes as a sharing in the events of Good Friday. It is as though he says to us, “keep your eyes fixed on the crucifix, and see behind it the glorious face of the Risen Lord”.

Pope Francis has said that we must realise that “we are not living in an era of change, but the change of an era”. He went on to say, “The situations we live in today pose new challenges for us that are difficult to understand” *(10th Nov. 2015)* - for example, the challenge and concerns posed by the new technologies. Today’s Gospel passage invites us to share in the conviction that, if we hold firmly to faith in Jesus Christ, endure with patience, we can, with courage face all challenges, confident that we will be vindicated.

*“Lord Jesus,*

*steady our hearts in time of trial;*

*let us see things*

*in the light of what you endured for our sake,*

*betrayal, agony injustice mockery, and cruel death.*

*Help us to trust in the light*

*that shines in your life, death and resurrection.”* **Amen.**