

Buildings and birth pangs

No-one ever said that being a follower of Jesus would be easy and that was certainly the experience of the twelve disciples who followed him. In fact it must often have been an infuriating experience, not least because in trying to keep up with Jesus you were constantly being wrong-footed. Things you presumed to be true were suddenly false. Assumptions that were the very foundations on which your life was built were suddenly pulled from under you. In following Jesus you discovered that the world wasn't what you thought it was. Suddenly everything was turned upside down and inside out and you had to adapt to a new world that was being disclosed. Not easy.

So, spare a thought for the poor hapless disciple who doubtless thought he was engaging in harmless small talk with Jesus outside the temple in Jerusalem. He and the other disciples had just witnessed Jesus outwitting the religious establishment that was based there and now, as they leave, they pass the massive foundations of that huge complex. Nowadays that disciple would doubtless pause to take a selfie with Jesus and in a flash his photo would ping round the world to his many contacts. And that unsuspecting disciple would hope that his contacts' reaction would echo what he now says to Jesus: 'Wow! Just look at those large stones and buildings!' After all, this was some sight. If you stand today at the wailing wall, which is all that remains of the temple, you can count 24 rows of stones rising up to a height of 75 feet above you. Some of the stones weigh one hundred tons each. Those 24 rows, however, rest on another 19 rows of stones that lie beneath the ground, such foundations being necessary for the entire original edifice which towered above. No wonder this disciple's awestruck reaction. He, after all was just some country bumpkin from up in Galilee where they didn't have buildings like that: 'look at those stones, those buildings!' But, oh dear. Here we go again. The poor man is setting himself up for yet another rug-pulling moment from Jesus. 'Do you see these great buildings?' says Jesus. 'Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.' And that disciple, and the rest of them would have been dumbfounded.

You see, quite apart from its size, there were other reasons why this temple might be thought to be indestructible. It was, after all, a holy place. It was believed to be the very centre and axis of the whole world, and the

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dwelling place of Israel's God, the God of all the earth. How could it ever be destroyed? On the contrary, God would destroy anyone who dared to strike at it. If the Romans attacked, they'd be defeated! There was an entire ideology and a way of life that was based on the temple. Israel's very identity and security was built into its bricks. And all this, destined for destruction, for rubble – or so said Jesus. And so it was to be. When you want to inflict damage upon a nation you choose very carefully which buildings you are going to attack. The 9/11 bombers chose prominent symbols of American power and identity for their act of vengeance, and when the Jews foolishly rose up against the Romans 40 years after Jesus' warning, it's no surprise that they quickly attacked the temple. Inevitably it was crushed and ransacked, those mighty walls demolished and the menorah, the great seven-branched candle-stand that adorned the temple's interior, was seized and paraded as a trophy. The level of destruction was immense, the scale of suffering appalling, the sheer cruelty and brutality shocking. When the Romans were provoked they knew how to be ruthless.

What Jesus was doing here was confronting his people with the reality of immanent loss. Things long considered firm and immovable, things regarded as resilient and indestructible, things viewed as permanent were being given a sell-by date. And it's so hard to come to terms with loss on that scale. This is a theme that we have explored recently in our midweek fellowship as we have been studying the Old Testament prophets, for they too spoke of destruction and loss, of a previous fall of Jerusalem in the 6th century BC by the Babylonians. They too spoke of endings of things thought permanent and of deep, unimaginable loss. And they too were met with disbelief and denial. And as we have thought of our own context we have found ourselves drawn to one recent incident of massive destruction and loss, when once again huge, strong buildings came crashing down and I refer to what we now call 9/11. And I would suggest that it is right and appropriate to read our passage this morning with 9/11 in mind for in both cases what was being signalled was the end of a world, a familiar world thought to be stable and immovable.

Think for a moment of the context of 9/11. Just 12 years earlier the Berlin Wall had come crashing down, itself signalling the end of something considered permanent and indestructible – the Soviet Union. And there were people who believed that the fall of Communism signalled a new world order that would endure. So, a man named Francis Fukuyama wrote a famous book

called 'The End of History and The Last Man'. In it Fukuyama saw recent world history in terms of the conflict between capitalism and communism, represented by the USA and the Soviet Union. And he saw the fall of the Berlin Wall as the final triumph of free market capitalism and liberal democracy which would become the final, enduring form of human government. In this sense history was over. It had reached its end, its final fulfilment. The West had won. Globalization – the remaking of the entire world in the image of the global free market - would reign supreme. This was an evolutionary end-point.

Then came 9/11, targeted at those symbols of the free market, capitalist world, the twin towers in New York. What we should have realised then was that the so-called end of history was an illusion. What we should have realised then was that globalisation as understood was a presumption. What we should have realised was that 9/11 marked the end of a world order that was wrongly thought to be inevitable and fixed and universal – and that a new chapter of history was beginning. And what has happened since, with the rise of militant Islam, and the terrible events in Paris on Friday, and the chaos that has brought tides of refugees to our shores, is all part of the collapse of that world that we thought was for good. In many ways we are back to that day in Jerusalem with Jesus and the disciples. He recognised the immanent collapse of an order that people thought was indestructible. And he saw that the demise of that order would be accompanied by all kinds of turmoil and upheaval: wars and rumours of wars, 'for nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines...' This is how this old order falls, with chaos and disruption. And so too with us. The collapse of the old empires, the dismantling of the old West-dominated power-arrangements are being accompanied by conflict and destruction. And the world, like that of Jesus' day, is a scary place – and we feel that today, as we unite in solidarity with the people of Paris.

So is there any good news? Is there any hope? Is there any gospel in this passage? Well, yes, there is. Because having pronounced doom upon the temple Jesus says something extraordinary, something quite shocking. He says, 'This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.' What? The beginning of the birth pangs? Just get this. Jesus is foreseeing unimaginable destruction and mayhem and suffering. He is foreseeing terror. And he's describing it as birth pangs! Now, if you have read a description of the last days of Jerusalem as the Romans besieged it you, the sickening things that went on, I doubt that birth

pangs is the phrase that would come to mind. Slaughterhouse might be more apt. Yet such is Jesus' confidence in the sovereignty of God, such is his trust in the Lordship of God over evil, that he is able to reimagine what was going to happen as birth pangs – confident, in other words that something new, something of God's Kingdom would be birthed out of it.

Let me give you an illustration. I used to be a hospital chaplain and two wards that I would visit were the cancer or oncology ward, and the maternity ward. It struck me that both were places of pain. In fact both were places of groaning – severe groaning. Yet there was such a difference between those two wards. One was a place of pointless pain: pointless, hopeless suffering. The other one, though, was different. The maternity ward was a place of hope. It was a place where groans were part of the arrival of something new, part of the birthing of new possibility. Well, Jesus looked ahead to those terrible days of siege and destruction. He heard the cries and the groans. And such was his faith in the sovereign power of God to birth God's kingdom even out of extreme evil that he had the audacity to imagine it not as the cancer ward but as the natal unit.

Paul does the same thing. In those verses from chapter 8 of Romans from which we read he looks at the world, at creation, and he turns his ear to the wind and he hears groaning. He hears the groans and sighs of a world in pain. He hears the groans of people suffering from sickness and disease. He hears the cries that arise from war zones. He hears the tears of refugees. He hears the bombs of the terrorists and the screams of the victims. He hears the sighs of the bereaved. He hears the anguish of the animal kingdom red in tooth and claw and suffering under the human species. And what does all that sound like? Well, in a moment of supreme imagination he dares to say that it is the sound not of dying but of birthing. 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.' God's Kingdom is being born. And suddenly the whole world is reframed, no longer a desolate place convulsed with futile and pointless pain – but a place of hope, of new beginnings, a place where pain is redeemed. Paul's God is one with power to transform the oncology ward into the maternity unit! Paul's world is seized by the contractions of the new creation!

I have spoken today of political upheavals that our world is witnessing for Jesus spoke of political realities that day outside the temple. And it's appropriate after Friday to speak of political realities. But what we learn here is

as personal and pastoral as it is political. All of us here know the pain of loss to differing degrees. All of us know, more or less, what it is to groan in pain. Well, earlier we baptised a little girl and in so doing we stamped her life with a pattern, a pattern of death and resurrection, of dying and rising to new life. It is the pattern by which we live as people of Christian faith. It is the pattern of God's sovereign Lordship that brings new life, new hopes, new possibilities out of death and destruction. It's the pattern by which even the worst loss is graced with new possibilities. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
we bless and praise you creating and saving God,
God of the new day,
God of the new week,
God who once again has brought day out of night
and light out of darkness.
You are the God who brought order out of chaos
in your birthing of creation in the beginning;
You are the God who brought new life
out of a dead end tomb when you raised Jesus;
You are the God who is always doing new things,
opening up new horizons,
turning cries of pain and despair into cries of joy and hope.
O God have mercy upon us and forgive us
for our captivity to things that destroy us.
Forgive us for our weakness before the lure of sin.

Save us we pray from the things that work for death
rather than for life.

Show us we pray the folly of our ways
and reassure us of the power of your grace
that forgives and heals and offers new life.

And so may we live the life of the baptised,
dying daily to the old order that is passing away

And rising to the new life in the Holy Spirit
that is even now invading your world.

We pray these things in Jesus' name and we pray
together in the words he taught us, saying...

O loving God,

we bring before you today a world that is groaning:
groaning with conflict,

groaning with inequality and injustice,
groaning with longings for a better world
and for better lives.

And we join our groans to these,
only ours are the groans of prayer,
inspired by your Holy Spirit who sighs in and with the world
and in our prayers.

And we pray today for the people of Paris.

We pray for the bereaved and the injured
in the terrorist attacks.

And we pray for those who commit such atrocities
that they may have a change of mind and heart.
O God we give thanks for wherever new life and new hope
bursts forth, replacing oppression and despair.
We give thanks today for the elections in Myanmar
and the hopes that emerge
with the election of Aung Saan Suu Kyi.
We pray for a peaceful transition to greater democracy
and for reconciliation and unity in that land.
And as we prepare for our Mulnaje Mission Concert
We pray for the situation in Malawi.
Ruth Shakespeare, medical director of the mission,
tells us that they are struggling at present,
without power for many hours of the day.
And rainfall has been poor
and many are struggling with hunger.
O God bless the people of Malawi and bless the mission.
And we pray those in our fellowship in special need:
for those recovering from hospital treatment,
for those facing hospital treatment,
for those recently bereaved,
for those otherwise in need of prayer.
An we pray all the things in the name of Jesus Christ
Our Lord and saviour. Amen.

Loving God, we pray for Christa and her family.
We thank you for Christa's years of service
to this church as a member and an elder,
for all the ways she has used her gifts.
We thank you for the joy of her family
and all that they have given to this church
by being part of it.
Bless Christa and Stevin,
Bless Eden and Neale and Lieve.

May they settle well in California,
and find fulfilled and joyful lives there.
May they be a blessing to a church there.
And we thank you for the bond of the Holy Spirit
that unites us even when we are far apart.
We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.