

Strength is found through letting go of traditional securities

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Pentecost 26, November 18th, 2018

In today's gospel story, we hear Jesus prophesying that the Jerusalem temple will be destroyed, there will be wars, earthquakes and famines, and they should expect conflict and persecution. In short, life will not be easy. As for Jesus prophesying the temple will be destroyed, two things can be said. The first is that Mark wrote his gospel shortly after this had actually occurred, so he was using a current event to illustrate Jesus' words. The other thing is that Jesus could well have said this, and it is prophecy, but prophecy is not predicting the future. It is expressing something of God's will in the present. Jesus was simply pointing out that because the temple was oppressive, it would eventually fall. This passage can be summed up in Jesus' response to the disciple who remarked how grand the temple was. He says not to put too much trust in such things; neither the building, nor the institution of the temple. Much which is assumed to be solid and provide security, does not and cannot. So the disciples found themselves in a state of transition. They lived when the temple stood strong, but one day it would be gone. The earthquakes and wars etc. were more examples of the instability of life, and warnings that people should be careful what they hold on to as foundations for life.

Mark was writing for his own Christian community. He had lost two mentors in Nero's persecution of Christians (Peter and Paul). The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans, who had also declared war on his people. So he knew too well that things which people assumed lasted forever, did not. Amidst all this, we hear Jesus saying 'do not be alarmed and do not worry'.

The message of the Old Testament passage and Song of Hannah is pretty much the same as the gospel passage, but it's seen through the eyes of an individual. The suffering and struggle is Hannah's pain at not being able to have children –something which anyone trying for a pregnancy will know. Hannah's song (sung after she gives birth to a son) expresses how her experience of powerlessness in her struggle to get pregnant, highlights the importance of putting one's trust and energy into the true ground of our strength and not in the usual things we trust, in order to flourish. There's the standard biblical exaggeration of God reversing the fortunes of those for whom things haven't gone well, while bringing down those for whom things have gone well, but it's just poetic licence for saying what the writer of Mark's gospel is saying. The conditions of our lives are not fixed, but very much in flux and transition, and so we need to beware of trusting in what cannot provide the certain, secure life we hope for, and not to put living on hold until the right conditions emerge.

We've heard Jesus describe the life God wants for us, and in which God is present for us (the kingdom of God), as being like a mustard seed. The mustard seed grows into a large bush, but Jesus doesn't say hold off living until the bush has grown, as the seed is enough. Often we want the bush to grow (or the conditions to be right) before we'll act, but Jesus says the life God promises emerges NOW, through the potential that exists in the present. It's easy to say 'if I get more money, I'll be more generous'; 'if I have more time, I'll do what is important for me to do'; 'if I can be less stressed, I'll get in control of my life', 'I'll commit myself, when I feel ready to'. Or as a community, we might decide that we'll be more faithful, *when we have enough resources behind us*.

Jesus is saying don't wait for conditions to be right, (because they may never be, or at least not according to your expectations), and anyway, the Holy Spirit is in the mix, so you're not alone. The Holy Spirit is God's Spirit, working within you, never imposing upon you, but only working in cooperation with you. It means God is working with and within you, to help bring about something of the potential that lies before and within you. But the Spirit never acts without us, so rather than procrastinating, you have to take the necessary steps, to allow space for the Spirit to work. In Hannah's case, the story shows us that this involves serious, passionate prayer, followed by serious, passionate baby-making activity. The spiritual work and physical activity go hand in hand.

Benedictine writer Joan Chittister, suggests we withdraw our energies from hoping or waiting for the perfect conditions to emerge, because the perfect conditions to do what we need to do to be the people we are made to be, already exist. It is not apart from conflict and suffering, weakness and insecurity, and imperfection, that we must commit ourselves in faith to what is life-giving. She puts it this way: because we have put too much emphasis on the false perfection of fundamentally imperfect situations, we have overlooked those things in life that are really the ground of our truest strengths: the possibility of conversion, the call to independent thinking, faith in the presence of a companioning God, the courage to persist, surrender to the meanings of the moment, and a sense of limits that leads us to take our proper place in the human race. (*Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* by Joan Chittister)

There are special times of transition in our lives: changing year level at school, ending a job, beginning a new one, moving house, losing friends, wondering whether someone could become a friend, ageing, change in government, changes in work practices, international unrest, uncertain future for the church and things 'not being like they once were'. In these situations, then, what conversion might we be being called to? What is God asking us to give up (for our own good and for the good of others)?

Discerning that sometimes involves first establishing what is most valued and determines what is to be kept and what is to be discarded. While, at other times, we just see what needs to be let go of and what needs to be newly grasped, and that helps us see what is most valued.

In our transitions, what sort of independent thinking are we being called to by God? Independent thought doesn't have to differ from everyone else. It just has to be our own. In other words, what special perspective or insight can we bring? Jesus didn't suggest we do everything the way he did, or do what we think he might do if he were here now, but he said be like me *in being authentically yourself*. When Jesus came to address the big issues of the world, his approach was to work through *what was most human*, so there's a good starting point for us too.

In our transitions also, what is faith in the presence of a companioning God? Do we leave God as transcendently removed? Or do we accept that God's absolute otherness allows God to be in every aspect of our lives without interfering or dominating?

In whatever transition we might be going through in the present, what form might courage to persist take? It may be that it forces us to differentiate between what is really worth fighting for, and what is just uncomfortable to live with. If we can separate them, we have more energy available for what really matters.

In our present transitions, in what ways is God calling us to surrender to the meanings of the moment? That means that rather than fight against circumstances, we switch our energy into finding meaning or significance in what we cannot change, or it might be that we create the meaning.

Last of all, in our present transitions, in what ways are we being provided with a sense of limits that leads us to take our proper place in the human race? When circumstances are not what we want, and we, our friends, or the world around us, are changing more than we like, our inability to get on top of it all could just be God's way of helping us to see that we're not supermen and women, and that we need one another.

So let's not fear life not being easy or nice, or not going our way, or even not paving the way for what we think God wants us to do. Life will often be like that. But let's put our focus and effort into being alert to the opportunities God is calling us to and maybe even drawing us towards, within the fundamentally imperfect situations of our lives. As my favourite saying at present goes: real people are not perfect. And perfect people are not real.