

Pentecost 25c
St Aidan's, Box Hill North
Luke 21:5-19.
November 18 2007

BIRTH PANGS OR DEATH

THROES

As a young priest I was once appointed to a parish facing closure. A cynical priest asked if I was going to for their death throes. I could only reply "Not death throes but birth pangs."

The opening words of the gospel present a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples presenting just that situation. The disciples who were both Jewish and rural were impressed by the size of the temple - a sign and institution of Jewish religion and culture. Yet Jesus tells them that the temple will be destroyed in a context of violence, war and utter confusion. Matthew's account of the same gospel concludes these dire warnings with the words "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." One would have expected the destruction of the temple, wars, earthquakes etc --all signs of a cosmic, spiritual and emotional shaking of the foundations of life as the death throes of what is. Instead our Lord describes it as the beginning of the birthpangs - the birthpangs of a new age and kingdom.

On occasions I can share the disquiet of some at the shaking of the foundations of our belief, institutions and the frameworks that give shape and form to life. The danger is when the disquiet gives way to fear, unwillingness to respond and spiritual inertia and cynicism. The challenge of the gospel is to be able to discern the difference between death throes and birth pangs.

This theme will recur for us over the coming weeks during the season of Advent. In such a time as this the question becomes; "How are we to be faithful as a Church?" Note the question. For to be faithful is not always the same as being "successful."

As we explore this gospel I can see that Jesus encouraged his disciples to make four particular responses in their discipleship that are just as relevant today for our church and context.

The first is that the Church is invited to

(1) SEEK THE GIFT OF DISCERNMENT.

These passages in the first three gospels are full of references to the end of time and contains apocalyptic images and language.

Jesus rather spoilt the awe struck spirit of the disciple who exclaimed; "What large stones and what large buildings." Jesus asked him."Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down"

It is helpful to read this passage not as a prediction about the future, but as a word addressing the issues pressing the Christian Community to whom Luke and the other gospels were writing. The events depicted in this chapter do not come out of some Christian crystal ball, but are the very stuff of the life of a Christian community.

"The violence of war, the coming destruction of the temple, the perilous existence of the Church under persecution, the enticing voices of false prophets and Messiahs were urgent concerns for the Christian community, and this gospel speaks directly to them."

In a very real way this gospel mirrors our global reality. Every continent on the earth contains internal divisions - many experience violent warfare and strife. Whilst a few live in great comfort and wealth there is a growing disparity between rich and poor.

The physical environment and climate is reflecting the pollution of the atmosphere and threatens drastic changes which will impact upon us and our grandchildren.

As Myers writes;" it is hard to believe that history has any redemptive purpose. Things seem to be getting worse not better. The emotional cost of living in such a time is enormous. Sadness, awe, rage, fear and a feeling of overwhelming powerlessness are the constant companions of thinking people."

Myers, Say To This Mountain. Orbis Press. page 175.

Nor is the Christian Church exempt from such feelings of despair and uncertainty. In such a time it is very easy to fall into several errors.

Because we often find these negative feelings intolerable, many people seek to displace them with aggressive behaviour towards a "scape goat" or an enemy. So Adolf Hitler discovered the Jewish conspiracy to destroy Germany. Within our own nation there have been attempts to focus upon "Asian migration" or Aboriginal priorities as enemies which threaten the nation.

Some Christians fall into such a trap. It is all "their fault"

"Their' can alternate from being the Diocese or Bishops, to the Masons or Media. If only----

Well the list can go on. Scapegoats are a form of denial of reality and a distortion of our own inner feelings of inadequacy or powerlessness.

Whatever else Christian leaders and communities are to seek, we do need the gift of discernment. This gospel does not provide any criteria from distinguishing the false voices from the true voices, no litmus test to determine authenticity. However the mention of false prophets alerts the church not to be gullible or taken in by every pious voice that has a new idea. The Church is called to listen carefully. -- to the community in which we live and to the needs of others. To listen carefully to our own community life and for the voice of God through Scripture, tradition and within experience. We are called to think clearly and in doing so nurture the gift of discernment. That gift which helps us distinguish between right and wrong, between Christ's way and the way of the world.

The second response which the gospel encourages is that the Church is invited to seek

(2) THE GIFT OF PATIENCE.

Whilst our global reality mirrors the reality of this gospel, our historical situation is quite different from that of the first readers of the gospels. The world did not collapse, nor did the Son of Man come in the clouds with great glory during the lifetime of the original twelve nor in the succeeding two thousand years.

Jesus warns his disciples that they are not to get over excited about this event or that assuming that it means the end of the earth.

Instead of becoming alarmist, the church is to take a long look, to be patient.

(3) THE CHURCH IS INVITED TO BE HOPEFUL.

In spite of wars, earthquakes and violence the Church is called to faithfulness and hope.

It is interesting to note that the other two gospels have Jesus describing the long list of calamities facing his readers as "the beginning of the birth pangs."

That is a very powerful and striking image. It takes seriously the reality of present suffering and frustration. This is no pollyanna denial of pain or reality. Rather there is the promise that rather than being the sign of death these pains are the sign of the coming birth of new life. These sufferings do not lead to despair but to hope. The same is true for the Church today. Some Christians are so overwhelmed by signs of declining numbers and weakening structures that they either retreat into a bunker mentality or despondency.

The gospel today declares that the signs of adversity we face today are only signs of death to those who have lost the spirit of aliveness. To those who are impregnated with hope they are the beginning of the birthpangs.

The Church is invited by Jesus to seek the spirit of discernment, to be patient and to be hopeful.

Finally the Church is called

(4) TO TRUST THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Again Matthew and Mark close this section with words often misinterpreted by lazy preachers as an excuse not to prepare a sermon.

"When they bring you to trial, do not worry beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given to you at that time, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit."

Or in the gospel this morning;

"So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you words"

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I recall a Priest whom I inherited when I went to the Diocese of Rockhampton misusing that text as a justification for not preparing his sermon, but simply getting up and speaking. The trouble was that his words made the Holy Spirit appear very inarticulate. I could only persuade him otherwise by reminding him of the first part of the text. "When they bring you to trial etc' and promising that as his Bishop I would ensure that those words would become literally true!

The promise of the Holy Spirit is not a justification for laziness or religious eccentricity. However there is the fundamental point where Christians are called to trust the Holy Spirit.

To trust the Holy Spirit - the go-between God- the one who enables communication between members of the Christian community. The one who enables communication for those who seek to share the faith of Christ with others.

It is the Holy Spirit whom Jesus describes as the comforter; and we should always remember that this has a double meaning, - to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. As we consider our life together as a Christian community perhaps we need to regain the symbolism of an old French tapestry. It pictures the Bishop of Ono in full regalia on his horse riding behind an army, pushing, prodding and poking the reluctant soldiers with his pastoral staff. Underneath is the caption " The Bishop of Ono comforts the soldiers."

Pushing, prodding, protecting and empowering; we need to trust the Holy Spirit in the same way and discover that what appears to be darkness is but birth pangs -new age.