

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 14 November 2021

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Mark 3:1-8

The beginning of the birth pangs

When you see or hear someone preaching about the end of the world or future destruction via SNS (social networking sites), what do you do? Do you hail the person as a true prophet, or do you just ignore him/her? In the reading, we see such a fully apocalyptic Jesus. Through his saying, we will see what it means for the faith community. It will help us see that faith in God enables us to discern hope from crises and chaos as they are the signs of the birth pangs.

The reading – Mark 13:1-8 as a whole shares apocalyptic images and language with the same genre of Jewish writings. It is helpful to read it not as a predictive message about the future but as a message to the faith community at the time of writing. That is, the described events are the things of the community's everyday life. The violence of war, the impending destruction of the Temple, the difficult existence of the Church under persecution, the enticing voices of false prophets and false messiahs were urgent concerns for the Christian community, and Mark 13 speaks directly to them.

Jesus' saying about the destruction of the Temple is prompted by one disciple's comment about the grandeur of the buildings. Why Jesus said such a thing if it was not a predictive message about the imminent future? Three things are noted here. First, the faith community will be forced to develop a spirit of discernment. Many will come in 'Jesus' name' and seek to lead members of the community astray. Discerning what the truth is is an ongoing challenge even for us who are surrounded by all kinds of information, including fake news. Under the title of *How to fight fake*, Stephen Davis reports about a university research project. It is found that when people share things with friends, it's not important if the things are true or not. More important is whether it was amusing or something they had not heard before because making their friends laugh was the priority.¹ In short, people are not really concerned about the overall well-being of other people. On the surface, we seem to live in a different world from Jesus' time, but the ways of people think, behave and do remain the same as before. As such, Jesus doesn't say how to distinguish the false voices from the true voices. Rather, the mention of the

¹ *Listener, November 6-21, 2021, p12.*

false prophets alerts the Church not to be gullible, not to be taken in by every pious voice that has a new idea. The Church is to listen carefully and to think clearly, and in so doing to nurture a spirit of discernment based on faith in God.

Second, the Church is required to keep faith under what circumstances. We may see instant outcomes when we take action on something. For example, it is tempting to see that the eradication of the most pressing evil or the achievement of the most immediate goal to usher in the reign of God here and now. But the history shows that there remain so many more evils to eradicate, so many more goals to achieve. To this, Jesus says that it will be done in God's time, not in ours, as neither omens nor accomplishments guarantee the ultimate fulfilment of God's purposes. God calls for faith in Christ with patience in which the hope of the Church is found. When wars, threats of wars, earthquakes, famines represent the worldly chaos in which people in Mark's community find themselves, we have COVID alongside many other issues. Living in such conditions makes the Church vulnerable as few things warrant optimism about the future. All this chaos that Jesus calls *the beginning of the birth pangs*. It takes the reality of the present sufferings seriously. But in the economy of God, the birth pangs have a purpose as they signal the coming birth of new life. As such, the sufferings do not lead us to despair but to hope, to the new day of God.

In our story time, children could see that the foundation is important to build a house. If the foundation is not rightly placed or firm enough, the house will not stand but collapse. The question was, 'how did Jesus know that the great buildings would be thrown down? He knew that the foundation of the temple, which was placed in the faith in God initially, was being corrupted. The temple systems failed God as keeping the human tradition was more important for them. Their corrupted faith in God wouldn't sustain the temple and their religion. But it's not the end, as those omens and chaos were the part of the birth pangs.

In her book - *The Great Emergence – How Christianity is changing and why - A look at the reconfigurations of North American Christianity*, Phyllis Tickle offers surprisingly deep insights that apply to the present church context well.² According to her, every five hundred years, the Church cleans out its attic and has a giant rummage sale. For her, this is an accurate summary of the Church's massive transitions over time. According to the pattern, we are living in such a time of change right now. Tickle calls it "the Great Emergence" - a time of dizzying

² The book was published in October 2008.

upheaval and hopeful promise during which various sectors of today's church swirl into a great confluence at the centre.

Tickle begins with a look at the split between Catholicism and Protestantism and how Christianity became a global religion as a result of the Great Reformation. At the heart of this event was the question of authority. Tickle looks at a host of contributing factors that have moved us toward the contemporary soulcape: Albert Einstein, the automobile, the influence of Karl Marx, the spiritual strand, the drug age, the erosion of Sola Scriptura, and the reconstituted family. Tickle observes the impact of technology on Christianity through the shift from performed to participatory music and the changed ideas about the priesthood of all believers thanks to the worldwide use of the computer and Internet. In the book's last section, Tickle looks at the contemporary Great Emergence with North American Christians classified into four groups: Liturgicals, Social Justice Christians, Renewalists, and Conservatives. She outlines the differences between them and then ponders some of the lineaments of what she calls "the Emergent or Emerging Church": global, relational, non-hierarchical, paradoxical, and mystical.

What we learn from all is that despite the challenges and changes, the Church has always been able to reconfigure herself for the past two millennia, and she will continually do so as its firm foundation is in Christ Jesus. May God help us that we can develop the spirit of discernment. It will help us be faithful to Christ Jesus, which will make us be the good foundation of the Church that will be emergent and emerging. We know that that the emerging Church will continue in the eternal. Amen.