

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

14.11.2021
By Fiona Bullock

Introduction

Friends, thanks for reading along with Spirituality of Conflict. We are keen to hear from our readers. There are about 1000 people who get this email every week and we have the audacious hope that we could hear from 200 of you. We've got five very simple and short questions for you — it will take you just a minute to do — and it'd really help us as we continue our Spirituality of Conflict planning. [The survey is found by clicking here](#)

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This reading is a beautiful example of how Jesus communicated with others: in this case, four of the disciples. He considered his audience and spoke to them in a way to which they could relate. Famed for his use of parables, Jesus chose his words with great skill and delivered them with his incredible gift of storytelling. He blended images from the dreams and visions recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures directly with contemporary scenes and real fears in order to ultimately give hope in the darkest of times.

This passage alludes to the great conflicts we all experience in life: life versus death; light versus darkness; hope versus fear; certainty versus uncertainty. Through times of living with COVID restrictions, declining mental health, concerns about the planet, violent conflict, or simply needing an escape from one's current circumstances, this passage offers words of hope that promise better times to come.

As you read the passage, I invite you to reflect upon your own situation. Are there walls that you would like to break down? What are the negative influences in your life? Where do you find hope?

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## Text

Mark 13:1-8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what

large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

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## Comment

In the reading of Scripture, it is important to be aware of our own prejudices and what we bring from our context and experience. Here I am compelled to share one of my own prejudices: any reading about ‘end times’ or apocalypse leaves me cold. I struggle to square the God of love, affirmation and grace that I know with the God of fire, brimstone and judgement of such imagery. Acknowledging the conflict that I already have with the text has allowed me to sit with the words and seek a deeper understanding of Jesus’ interaction with the disciples. There, in the midst of seeming darkness, I found words of hope and assurance of a new day through three lessons.

### **Do not put your faith in the things of this world but in the Lord himself.**

The first image presented to us is of the Temple stones and building, the sheer magnitude of which are difficult for us to comprehend. In William Barclay’s study on Mark’s Gospel, he references Josephus, who stated that “some of the stones were forty feet long, by twelve feet high, by eighteen feet wide”. It takes no stretch of the imagination to understand why the disciples and the people of Israel thought it would be indestructible when complete. Yet scale and grandeur would not stop the destruction of the Temple, as prophesied by Jesus. Those who put their faith in the things of this world would be disappointed, but those who put their faith in the Lord would be satisfied. For even death would not be the end for the one who would be resurrected.

When we find ourselves feeling trapped or claustrophobic in our circumstances, perhaps we should remember that the stones of the Temple fell. Whatever walls are present in our lives, stone by stone they can be taken apart. However, faith, hope and love remain, even if, at times, they can only shine through the cracks.

### **Always seek the truth and remember who you are.**

One of the most frequent conflicts we experience in life is that between the truth and the lies we allow ourselves to believe. When society consistently seems to tell us that our value is to be found in our wealth, status or background, it can wear us down to the point where we begin to believe it. We carry around impostor syndrome rather than confidence in our abilities and experience. We begin to listen to the words of the dissenters around us, especially when we speak to ourselves in such a way too.

Throughout our lives, there will be many false prophets and idols which serve to distract us from the one who gave us being and in whom we find our worth, our God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus told the disciples that they would encounter false prophets or messiahs, those who purported to speak the truth, but they should not allow themselves to be led astray. Rather, they should seek the truth and keep their eyes fixed on the God who offers unconditional love. We too need to find our own truth.

**Do not be afraid – this is not the end. A new dawn will come.**

Finish the phrase: “it’s not over til...” Our culture has not shifted as much as we might think from the time of Jesus. Even today we want notice of the end coming. The end of a relationship. The end of a life. The end of the world. The disciples were eager to know what they should look for that would signify the end times. But I believe that Jesus used this question to illustrate that even in the midst of suffering, there is hope. We do not need to wait until the end times for change to come.

William Barclay comments that in his reply to the disciples, Jesus used the Jewish imagery that the disciples would know and to which they could relate. Wars, famines, earthquakes, and destruction would come, or rather, there would continue to be suffering. However, Jesus told them not to be afraid, and tells us not to be afraid, because although it may feel like the end in the midst of such suffering, it is not the end yet. Jesus did not say that a plethora of wars and natural disasters would mark the beginning of the end. Instead, he said that although suffering is in the world, an inevitable part of the world, still there is hope. No matter how helpless our situations may feel or how much we might feel like we lack control, hope lives on.

It is this hope that leads to the ‘birth pangs’ mentioned at the end of the passage. They may allude to the birth of a new heaven and new earth, but I would argue that they suggest that we might always lift ourselves out of, and emancipate others from, harmful circumstances. There is always hope for a better future. There is potential to cry, ‘enough!’ and change direction. Conflict and suffering can inspire or necessitate change.

## **Conclusion**

This passage, which seems to focus on death, suffering and destruction, is actually about hope. The Lord is constant, but the constructs and constrictions of the world will fade away. For this reason, we should always seek the true Messiah, and find our worth in him, instead of being lured by the promises or being hurt by the accusations of false prophets or idols. There is hope that we will rediscover our nature as beloved children of God and, as we grow into this belonging, we will have a change of perspective that will allow us to seek new paths. Whilst in the middle of conflict and suffering it may feel like all hope is gone, we are assured that this is not the end. A new beginning is possible, especially if we ground ourselves in God’s unconditional love and grace.

I freely admit that I misjudged this passage of Scripture. If I can do it with text, how much more easily could I do it with a person or a set of circumstances in my life? I was reminded of the need to set aside my prejudices in order to expand my perspective and my mind. Sometimes we need to break something down before we can build something new.

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## Response

Draw and cut out individual brick shapes which can be 'built' together as a wall on a larger piece of paper, using pins or blu tack. On each brick, write down something you wish to turn around in your life. Perhaps you want to stop feeding yourself negative comments or you want to positively engage in acts of random kindness. Whenever you make progress in an area, turn the brick around and, after decorating the back, show that side in its place. Or simply remove the brick to let the light in. Watch as you turn your life around.

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## Prayer

God of the sunset and the sunrise,  
remind us that hope is often a seed  
planted in the darkest of times  
and brought to fruition through struggle.  
May we take care to nurture it  
and ourselves  
nourished by your unconditional love.  
Amen.

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## Further Reading

*References are made in the comment to Barclay, William, The Gospel of Mark, (Edinburgh, Saint Andrew Press, 1964), 317–335.*

### **Survey – five short questions (it'll take two minutes)**

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### **Spirituality of Conflict Book**

The book *What Were You Arguing About Along The Way?* is a newly revised and edited collection of Spirituality of Conflict entries for years A, B and C. This volume contains introductions, reflections, responses and prayers for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Pat Bennett, the brilliant theologian, scientist and liturgist (and part of the Spirituality of Conflict team since it began) has spent hundreds of hours reading through the entries, selecting and editing those entries that work well together, and compiling them together in a volume of resources that is rich with support for everyone, whether using it in preparation for preaching, or for personal or group learning.

It'll be released from Canterbury Press in late November this year, just in time for Advent.

The ISBN is 978-1-78622-399-9

You'll be able to get it from all good bookshops, or online venues.

If you can order directly from Canterbury Press, or through your local bookshop, we'd be extra pleased!

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey