

Lord of History, God of the Future
33rd Sunday, Year B
Mark 13: 24-32
15 November 2009

Although we are receding away from the time of Christian beginnings year by year, we are also, oddly enough, coming to understand more about them than we have ever previously knew. An army of scholars are closely examining the New Testament texts, are continually analysing archaeological discoveries, and are digging deep into the documents of the ancient world, to come up with a steadily developing composite picture of the early Christian communities. So year-by-year we are getting a clearer understanding of who and what they were.

Although I think I have a rough idea of some of their main conclusions, I am brought up with a round turn every now and then by a new insight that is offered into the lives of the people we hear about Sunday by Sunday. So at a conference a few months ago I was startled to hear that the Corinthians, who St Paul pours out so much controversial energy on, probably only amounted to a church of around 25 people. And we can forget about a mental image of them meeting in a building like this. It would have been a house church in which they eye balled one another across what would have been a space about the size of a modern living room. So to get things in accurate proportion, when Paul, just before his execution in Rome, looks back on a lifetime's hard work of building up a network of new churches across the Mediterranean world, he is thinking about a cluster of modest sized communities, probably none of which would have been bigger in numbers than our regular worshipping congregation.

This is something we need to bear in mind as we consider those dramatic words of Jesus about the close of the age he is living in, the time when many of the ruling powers will fall like the stars from heaven. Amongst other things, Jesus was a prophet, and here he predicts what in fact happened, the rebellion against Roman rule that occurred some years after his death, the devastating three and a half year war that followed, and the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

These events ended the world that Jesus had grown up in. The Galilean villages and seaside towns that were his stamping ground were the first to experience the Roman legions scorched earth policy. The high priestly families and the Sadducees, all the people connected with running the Temple, or accommodating the Romans, were extinguished, either by their revolutionary countrymen, or by the invaders. The zealots, and all the nationalist nutters, who started the time of troubles, fought to the last man, and were wiped out. So were the Essenes, and many of the fringe utopian religious communities, who unsuccessfully tried to stand off the Romans in their great hillside fortress at Masada.

But above all, Jews experienced the immense psychic shock of the central symbol of their faith, the Temple, being destroyed. The Jewish religion of Jesus' time was a melange of competing sects who could agree about only one thing, the importance of Temple worship. Now that was gone, and the foundations of their faith were destroyed. So all that colourful language that describes the time of distress is fully justified. This was the end of the Jewish world, as they had known it. In fact we need to understand that when we are dealing with

Judaism today, we are in contact with the descendants of the Pharisees, the then minority party that competed with Jesus' message and movement, and which seized the initiative and the high ground after the destruction of the Temple to reform Jewish religion in their mould, which is rather different to the way it used to be.

So what is Jesus' advice to his latter day followers as this appalling situation unfolds? Don't get sucked in to supporting or co-operating with any of the hotheads who start the trouble, and don't become quisling accomplices of the invaders. Try to remain calm, as the panic merchant's fizz around like phosphorous on water. Make your way to a place of safety, and get out of the way of the men of violence of all persuasions. And God will watch over you – "he will send the angels to gather his chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the world to the ends of heaven." What is more the religious centre of gravity has now shifted to you. All that the Temple was in God's purposes, you have now become. The fragile network of small, at times struggling; Christian communities across the Mediterranean world are now it. You are the centrepiece of God's plans for the world.

Of course this message isn't just aimed at the original Christians in their particular situation. It broadens out into what you might call a theology of history, and a claim on our hearing about exactly who is in charge around here. It is about the vigilant God who watches over us in his providential designs, who is ordering the human story so that it isn't just a tale of one dammed thing after another. He is involved in what is going on around here, and what is more he will have the last word on human affairs. The story of the human race is a story with

a beginning, a middle, and an end, and God will there at the end to meet us.

But let's take a step back first to consider what we mean when we say that God is in charge of the human story. I have entitled this sermon "Lord of history, God of the Future," and I intend to spell out what I mean by that.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber said that history does not simply follow a plan, but takes place in dialogue between God and man. In other words, God isn't simply rolling out a pre-ordained plan in which our freedom turns out to be a mirage, because he is always able to get us to do what he wants us to do, even without us realising it. Rather there is a give and take between God and the human race, a continual dynamic of initiative and response, then counter response, in which the ball is always in play, and the plot, though developing generally in the direction God intends, is often taking quite unexpected turns. God is a master tactician, able to respond in astounding ways, even when we turn him down.

The most vivid example is the incarnation of Jesus himself. The first eight chapters of Mark's gospel contain Jesus' message about the Kingdom, in which God presents his firm and final offer to the human race, to put things right. The response from the human side of the line is "no," so God through Jesus changes tack and adopts a different course of action to establish the Kingdom. He takes the road to Jerusalem, and to crucifixion and resurrection, the way by which he incorporates human rejection into the way by which he makes things right for us. The usual expectations of Jewish religion back then was that if God's Messiah had risen from the dead,

then the trip wire had been set off that would end human history. But there is a Divine change of plan. The descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the creation of the Church, is God saying I have decided to allow a period of grace, of patient waiting, to give the human race a chance to get on board with the message. The church is my second chance option – the all aboard invitation community, whom I expect to be more effective than the Jerusalem Temple ever was.

So we are being told today that the Church is the pivot point of God's designs in history. It is that part of humanity where he dwells more than any other. It is his pride and joy, that small part of the world that he takes delight in, more than any other. It doesn't matter if it just consists of 20 people meeting in a back room. It is where the action really is, despite what the crowds are getting up to. His blessing, and his interest rest on it more than any other part of the human race.

This doesn't mean that God has written a blank cheque to cover any and all bad behaviour in the church. Judgement starts with the house of God, for he expects more of those to whom much is given. And it doesn't mean that his general grace isn't powerfully working for good with everyone. But his particular grace is with us, because he loves the church, and wants to see it grow and do well. After all, he has staked a lot on it.

And God is watching the human story, in which he is so involved, with a lot of interest. You could argue he is like a skilled novelist who is waiting for the right moment when his characters and his story have reached the point where he feels happy about bringing the tale to an end. He wants to bring it all

to a satisfying end for his characters, for himself and for his readers. Our rejections and misunderstandings are producing the tension without which no plot has interest. How does the story turn out is the question that drives history? Nobody knows but the Father, and he isn't letting on. But since God is the power of the future we know that no matter how many chapters this book has, and no matter how many sad tales are told about along the way, this is a story with an ultimately happy ending.