

Year B Ordinary 33 Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2018

**Reading:** Daniel 12:1-3

**Gospel:** Mark 13:1-8

### Reflection

*'The beginning of the birth pangs'<sup>i</sup> ...* I remember them well! Nothing superficial about birth pangs... coming from the depths of one's being, the very core, subtle at first but intensifying, rhythmic, focused, purposeful. And with those birth pangs, the deep sense of anticipation, the beginning of a journey that isn't going to be easy and cannot be avoided...an intense journey requiring endurance and a certain degree of letting go; involving pain, absolute absorption; a marathon, energy-sapping effort – not to be taken alone but with companions. Those companions become supporters, protectors, encouragers in times of anxiety, vulnerability and exhaustion. They are both minders and re-minders of the long-awaited outcome. The beginning of birth pangs heralds the call for midwives – those who assist in the delivery, for the birthing of *new* life.

In the apocalyptic writings of the book of Daniel, Michael is identified as the great prince, the protector of the people – the one who defends and intercedes for Israel.

*'There shall be a time of anguish such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered.....'<sup>ii</sup>* The promise is of deliverance, from oppression and into freedom, from war and into peace, from alienation and into belonging. Michael midwife's the Israelites into new life.

In the thirteenth chapter of Mark's gospel, as Jesus – journeying towards his own arrest, torture and death - foretells the destruction of the Temple and warns the disciples of difficult times ahead, his apocalyptic descriptors are accompanied by words of reassurance – “...do not be alarmed, this must take place<sup>iii</sup> ... ” and further on in the chapter as persecution is foretold he says “do not worry”<sup>iv</sup> and assures them of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Continuing through the chapter, the need for physical, emotional and spiritual endurance, discernment and watchfulness is made clear to the disciples.

The contrast between the disciples' focus on 'bricks and mortar' – large stones and great buildings – and the building of spiritual endurance encouraged by Jesus is not lost on us. As 'quake survivors' we are only too aware of the transitional nature of buildings. What once was considered strong, reliable and enduring, is now seen in a different light. While we may still long for beloved buildings or spaces that held significant memories and drew us into the presence of the Holy, we have learned new ways of being, discovered more about ourselves and one another, and built up endurance for the journey.

We know about birth-pangs! They have touched the core of our being and triggered intense journey requiring endurance and a certain degree of letting go. In terms of faith and spiritual endurance, Thomas Merton wrote the following:

*The more perfect faith is, the darker it becomes. The closer we get to God, the less is our faith diluted with the half-light of created images and concepts. Our certainty increases with this obscurity, yet not without anguish and even material doubt, because we do not find it easy to subsist in a void in which our natural powers have nothing of their own to rely on. And it is in the deepest darkness that we most fully possess God on earth.<sup>v</sup>*

We know that journey involves pain, absolute absorption; a marathon, energy-sapping effort – and is not to be taken alone but with trusted companions.

Even as we are rehoused and perhaps even hope for a new place of worship (!) we are increasingly aware of the importance of enduring fellowship, shared faith expressions and the encouragement received and given as we companion one another on our faith- and life's journey. Last Wednesday's fellowship with rest-home residents, gathered at Mary Potter, was a wonderful example of this.

But the edifices *we* admire and perhaps are tempted to cling to, take many forms.

Organisational structures (hence the call for national measures of well-being alongside GDP in the future), institutions and hierarchies that no longer best serve us or our communities; family traditions and routines that are no longer lifegiving. But the wars, earthquakes and famines we experience may be internal – warring emotions, seismic

shifts in our health; financial or relational famines. We are called to continue growing, learning and loving into fullness of life – despite the challenges and set-backs, despite the temptations to turn aside, despite the distractions that threaten our wellbeing – always attentive to the Christ in our midst.

The Christ of resurrection calls us on as living stones - as members of his Body, inviting us to birth and rebirth. The divine Spirit companions us.... as we companion one another.

Thanks be to God!

Helen Roud

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<sup>i</sup> From Mark 13:8c, NRSV

<sup>ii</sup> From Daniel 12:1, *ibid*

<sup>iii</sup> From Mark 13:7, *ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> From Mark:13:11, *ibid*

<sup>v</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 141, 134-135