

NO STONE LEFT STANDING

PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean

Sunday, November 15th 2009

Kingdom 3

Mk 13:1-8; Heb 10:1-25; Daniel 12:1-3

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

I've just finished reading 'The Cellist of Sarajevo', a haunting little book about the atrocities inflicted on civilians during the siege of Sarajevo from April 1992 to February 1996 in the Bosnian War.

The book takes its title from an actual incident, although the story that unravels around it is fictional. The fact on which it is based, was a mortar attack on a crowd of people queuing up outside a bakery to buy scarce bread, in which 22 people were killed.

For 22 days after this attack, one day for each of those killed, Vedran Smailovic, a well known Sarajevan cellist, at precisely the time of day the attack happened, walked to the spot where the mortar fell, sat down, took out his cello, and played Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor in honour of those killed. He did this in a place that was vulnerable to sniper fire, knowing that such an act of defiance would in all likelihood get him killed.

Why did he do it? Well, I don't want to spoil the book for you, but the siege of Sarajevo describes a world where all of the old patterns and certainties of life are de-constructed by war and violence. The International Criminal Tribunal later described the siege in this way: ***A campaign of unrelenting violence against the inhabitants of a European city so as to reduce them to a state of medieval deprivation in which they were in constant fear of death.***

Imagine it. Every night you live in fear of a rocket landing on your family as they sleep. It is no longer possible to cross the street outside your house for fear of sniper fire; there is no work; you are cut off from food, water, contact with your fellow human beings, entrapped in a world from which human dignity and respect recedes with each passing day. This lasts for nearly 4 years.

The cellist's musical act of defiance was a refusal to be brought down to the level of animals, a plaintive melody to the resilience of human dignity.

I found myself thinking about Sarajevo and its cellist when I read today's lectionary readings. Today's readings from Daniel, Hebrews and Mark's Gospel in their own ways describe a response to the collapse of everything as we know it. Not one stone shall be left standing.....

All of this raises the question: What do you do and how do you live when the world as you know it is being deconstructed around you?

This was the question in Sarajevo 15 years ago. It's the question in Zimbabwe today.

But there are other forms of deconstruction besides the trauma of civil war. Bereavement dismantles the shape and structure of life as nothing else can. Learning that you have a terminal or life-changing illness deconstructs your established world. The same is true of sudden unemployment, and being burgled gives it a run for its money as well. Each of these things is the dismantling and destruction of some of our particular temples, until not one stone is left standing.

That is the place that Jesus takes his disciples to when they sit in rapt admiration of the Temple. You see these stones? Not one shall be left standing.....it presaged, of course, the destruction of the

Temple just a few years later in AD70, an act that would have seemed impossible to those who sat admiring the solidity and beauty of the Temple structure just 4 decades before.

The Temple symbolised permanence, stability, identity. It was the thing in which the people trusted to give their lives meaning.

It's clear that Jesus felt, at best, ambivalent about the Temple. On the one hand he clearly respected it – even the act of overturning the tables of the money-changers and throwing them out of the Temple suggests that he supported what it really stood for (a house of prayer for all the nations). But on the other hand he attached relatively little importance to it (Mk 12:6, something greater than the temple is here) and ended up predicting its destruction.

The plot to have Jesus executed clearly relied heavily on witness evidence that Jesus had spoken out against the temple - 'destroy this temple and in 3 days I will rebuild it' was a fairly incendiary thing to say.

It's possible to see this as a development throughout the three years of Jesus' public ministry, from a time when he held the temple in high esteem, through a period when he wanted to reform it, ending up at a point where he foresaw and welcomed its destruction.

The destruction of the Temple poses the challenge for all of us: what happens when the edifice around which you have built your sense of identity and fulfilment is taken away? Bereavement, the loss of an important friendship, moving home, the loss of a job, retirement, whatever it may be. What happens when a critical structure of your life disappears?

Jesus' message was never anything less than uncompromising. He called people to a radical discipleship that placed the Kingdom of God ahead of home and family, work and leisure, comfort and personal ambition. Ouch! Please can I cut those bits out of my Bible?

But it's not that these things are wrong, it's that if they become too important to us then they can usurp the place of God in our lives, dilute and dissipate the power of a life dedicated to God. 'Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness', said Jesus, 'and all these other things will be yours as well'. Priorities, priorities, priorities.

The lectionary readings today throw up one of those links that you're never sure is down to genius or luck. The verses from the NT reading in Hebrews 10 contrast the trust that people put in the Temple system (the cult, sacrifices etc) with the 'new and living way' that Jesus has opened for us in order to access God.

It links to Mark 13 because it envisages a world where the temple no longer exists, and although in all probability this letter pre-dated the destruction of the temple in AD70, and therefore wasn't written with the benefit of hindsight, it envisages a world in which the Temple was no longer necessary, because it has been superseded by the 'new temple', Christ himself. A world where the old certainties have vanished (possibly even literally) but have been replaced with the undying certainty of God's love for us expressed in Christ.

This is what lies behind Jesus' challenge to his disciples that day when they sat looking at the Temple. It wasn't that he wanted to scare them, or shock them out of their complacency. It was that he wanted to help them see that they needed to place their trust in something that could never be taken away from them – a relationship to and with Christ that gives eternal meaning and significance to our lives, even when everything else is de-constructed around us.

A few years ago the a series of adverts came out for the fizzy drink Dr Pepper under the strap-line 'what's the worst that could happen?' These passages are about imagining the worst and knowing that it's survivable in Christ. They draw us from a place of fear to a place of trust, trust in the 'new temple', Jesus himself.

Victor Frankl was a psychiatrist. Born in 1905, he had been raised in the tradition of Freudian psychology, which says that those things that happen to you as a child shape your character and your personality and govern your behaviour. It's called determinism – the parameters of your life and the way you live it are programmed in to you, determined in particular by your early childhood.

But Victor Frankl was also a Jew, and along with almost all of his family he was imprisoned in the death camps of the Nazis in the 2nd world war. Apart from Frankl and his sister, everybody else in his family died. Frankl himself was tortured and subject to innumerable indignities, never knowing from one day to the next if he would be sent to the ovens to be gassed or to sweep up the ashes of others.

One day, naked and alone in a small room, he began to become aware of what he later called “the last of the human freedoms” – the freedom that his captors could not take away, his self-aware identity. In the midst of his horrendous experiences, he would use mental, emotional and moral disciplines to project himself into different circumstances; by the power of memory and imagination he would exercise the small and embryonic freedom he had, until it grew larger and larger within him. By the time of his release from captivity, Frankl had more freedom than his captors – they had more liberty, but he had more freedom.

Frankl went on to develop an understanding of human psychiatry that had at its heart this simple axiom – ***between stimulus and response, there is our freedom to choose.***

Determinism says that between stimulus and response there is....nothing. No gap, no choice. Something affects us. We respond. Born out of his own experiences, Frankl gave us a different view – between stimulus and response, there is our freedom to choose.

Coping with the end of different aspects of our world is never going to be easy, but we are not pre-programmed to fall to pieces. Between even the most unwelcome stimulus and our response is our freedom to choose. And in that sometimes very narrow and uncomfortable space we find Jesus waiting there, enabling us to build a future that is not determined by the forces of fate.

The cellist of Sarajevo restored a sense of human dignity when all was in danger of becoming feral and de-humanised. Christ calls us to discover that which can never be taken away from us. To place our trust not in those things that may one day be de-constructed, but in the unchanging and eternal promise of God's love for us in Christ, which will last for ever.