

Fr Paul's Homily

15th November 2009 – 33rd Sunday of the Year (B)

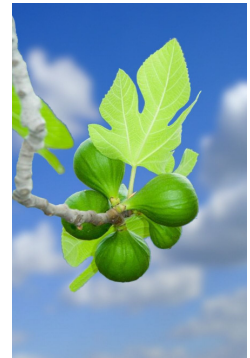
Mark begins his Gospel by speaking of a time of distress. The distress he means was the result of a political and economic turmoil that we cannot begin to imagine living in the relative stability of Winchester. Mark was writing at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and its centre the Temple.

The destruction and suffering this caused was unimaginable. To get anywhere near it ourselves we need to think in terms of the complete collapse of every government and financial system in the world, energy sources like oil and gas drying up and mass migration in search of basic livelihood.

For the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Palestine this was the end of the nation, of security, of the basic necessities for life like homes, work, food and drink. Mark was right to describe it as distress.

For those who listened to Mark's words, the Christians of the time, there was another vital element in the mix. It seemed that heaven and earth were passing away, there was total disaster and destruction of a pattern of life that had been taken for granted for a long time. But in the middle of all this distress and turmoil was Jesus and his promise of life.

Take the fig tree as a parable. The fig tree in the land where Jesus lived was unusual because it was unlike all the other trees. It was not evergreen and shed its leaves. It was unique in the way buds formed and new leaves suddenly appeared. It reminded people that summer approached with its new opportunity and life. The fig tree was taken as a sign of the difference that Jesus makes. Distress and suffering followed the destruction of Jerusalem. It seemed like the end of the world but Jesus was risen and present in their lives guaranteeing a new and bright future that not only replaced what had gone but meant that everything had to pass away before he could inaugurate the new reign and the new kingdom.



There is little danger that we will experience the kind of destruction and distress that came the way of the inhabitants of the Christian world in 70 AD but we still experience the distress of change that can sometimes be catastrophic and, in terms of feelings, would be difficult to distinguish from the suffering of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. Life, which at one moment can be full and free, with a sense of brightness and joy, can so easily change. One event can so easily cause catastrophic change and we are left devoid of any hope in the future.

Those moments in life that cause distress and the change, we would do anything to avoid, are important because they remind us of Jesus' words today that things are in fact passing away. The joy we have today has to disappear to make way for the new experience. Creation as we know it, as St. Paul says, is passing away and is in fact in a great act of giving birth. Time and life, the experience of being human in this world, creation itself is all part of the raw material that God is using to bring us into the life and joy that is his promise to us. Christ, our brother, has taken his place at the right hand of God his Father and is waiting. Waiting for the perfection of all his brothers and sisters who he has sanctified by his life, death, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit.

The chief of an Indian tribe was dying. They all lived at the foot of a mountain. The chief said to his three sons that if they climbed the mountain the one who returned with the most beautiful thing from the top of the mountain would succeed him as leader. The first son went and returned with a beautiful flower. The second brought a magnificent stone that had been polished by the rain and sandy winds. The third son returned with nothing. He told his father that when he reached the top of the mountain he looked at the view on the other side. He saw a beautiful land with green pastures and crystal like lakes, a place where his tribe could have a better life. He was so overwhelmed that there was nothing for him to bring back. The father said to this son that he would be the leader because he had brought back the most precious thing of all which was the gift of a vision for a better future.

As our year draws to its close we are invited to consider not so much what next year will bring but what it is that God has in store for us and what it is for which God is preparing us by our present life. As the gospel speaks of distress and the passing nature of reality, the Lord invites us to hear and accept the promise of fulfilment and joy which he promises in the life of resurrection and reward. This has to be the end, the aim, the vision to which we move and which will shape our preparation in this life.

So how does Jesus' promise of life fulfilled with God change the experience of living in this world?

As we continue the journey, the map we must read is the Word of God and the relationship we have with that Word in Jesus Christ. In the events and changes that are an indispensable part of life we must listen to the message of life that brings hope and the ability to persevere in difficulty and distress. We listen as we are doing now, we reflect on the message that is significant for us and we ask each day what it is the Lord is saying to us in each event of life. That he is present is as sure as the day.

In the Word of God and our relationship with Jesus, prayer is the satellite navigation that keeps us on course. Journeying towards God's promise demands that we will live our lives in tune with the one who makes the promise and we do that by finding a way of prayer that is appropriate to our circumstances and which is marked by generosity in the gift of time.

In that kind of prayer, which is essentially time given to our relationship with God, we will be able to see the light when the events of life bring distress and darkness. Those events are the indicator that we must grow in trust and confidence in the promise that God makes and in the love that always has for us and which we must have for each other.

In the transitory and passing experience of life let us rejoice in the Holy Spirit present in our lives leading us not only to a better future but to a share in the life of God himself.