

Mark 13:1-37 Sermon during Covid

On Christmas Day 1986, when I was five years old, my grandmother gave me a bible. On the front page is written in capitals 'This Bible was presented to STEPHEN PROUDLOVE on the 25th day of DEC 1986 by NAIN (the welsh name for granny) WITH LOVE. Matthew 24 v35.' There is lots of Tip-ex markings on the inscription and the lettering is capitalised and shaky, because at the time it was written, my grandmother was dying.

The chapter of Mark's gospel we've read from today forms a transition in the story between Jesus' teaching and controversies, and the beginning of the passion narrative – the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. In this chapter, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem (which happened in about AD70) and then talks about watching for the return of God at the end of time. Our reading today, is full of imagery and would take hours to properly deal with so I'm going to focus mainly on the verse my grandmother put in the front of my bible. Words that Jesus spoke when he too was transitioning towards his own death.

Covid is a difficult time. Our whole world has changed, and keeps changing in unpredictable ways. Some of us are scared of catching the virus. Others of us are anxious for other reasons. The disciples stared at the huge stones of the temple and wondered how they could ever be destroyed, and probably all of us have watched this pandemic with the same incredulity as the seemingly permanent way in which we live has been ferociously dismantled as we have adapted to lockdowns and distancing.

I've already described three different angles on what I'm trying to say. Covid has shocked us into realising our own fragility and the ease at which the givens of our world can be removed. My grandmother, knew her world was ending, and the fragility of life was all too obvious. And Jesus, too, is talking just as he was to begin the downward path towards death where the fragility of his own humanity was to be brutally demonstrated.

It is at these times where the words my grandmother picked out, words of Jesus from today's reading, seem particularly relevant: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.'

In this brief but profound line there is so much theology. In the beginning God created our world, not because God needed to have it, and certainly not because somehow our world forms part of God. God is separate from the world, like an artist is separate from a picture, and just like the picture has edges, so our world is finite and will one day, science tells us, get old and die. Whether it is in a ball of flame or a frozen stillness, when our world dies, and heaven and earth pass away, God's words will remain. God cares for his world, but his word will outlive it. When everything that seems so permanent comes crashing down around us, clinging to God's words is actually the only real constant we have.

Jesus, the Son of God, has long been associated with this idea of the 'Word of God', and here therefore we find that Jesus begins his journey to death on a cross stating that though the world, with its crosses on hills, cities, empires and huge temple rocks, may pass away, Jesus will never pass away. And so we hear, pre-echoes of the resurrection and ascension in this phrase too. Jesus is looking around at the world about him, knowing it will one day crumble to dust; and whilst looking, Jesus gives us a statement of faith in the eternal, unchangeable God who Jesus trusted to take him to the cross and beyond. We also can trust in this same God, following Jesus' example – but more

than that, because Jesus, is God's Word, resurrected and eternally seated with the Father in heaven. We can trust in Jesus himself, as our eternal constant when all else will fail.

Covid may have us feeling like our world has crumbled, perhaps only at the edges, or perhaps totally. There are losses we have felt during lockdown which can never be replaced and there are sadnesses that fill us up to breaking point. Even now, with hope on the horizon - time, anxiety and loneliness seem to swirl around us and we still face a long winter of disconnection and disease. It is in the middle of this blizzard of circumstance that we can hear Jesus' words above the din: Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Whether this pandemic is over quickly or not, whether we pass through unscathed or not, in the end what really matters is that Jesus' words to us will never waver, never become eroded, never fade and never become silenced. At the end of time, the sound that matters will be the word of God. Our hope, during Covid, is not solely upon a vaccine, a cure, or the lockdown effectiveness. Our hope is in God, who is outside of creation, and whose words of love to us will never be silenced.

Finally, I don't have many memories of my grandmother; I was just a little too young. I remember her in snippets, some actually quite fun really, as she was dying, but I was recently sent the transcription of her testimony – her story of faith - which she spoke about earlier in her life. Her faith was so important to her. Little wonder then that her inscription in the front of my Bible was this one. Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away. Knowing she was dying, this inscription is a statement of faith that even as her own world passed away, Jesus would save her – that his words would outlast any trial of sickness – even death.

For all of us, at some point, apparently death will be an issue. I can't say I'm looking forward to the day where my own personal world collapses. But I hope that one day, be that near or far (hopefully very far!) I will be able to trust that Jesus' words will be to me as trustworthy as they were when he uttered them, and that I will be carried home by his everlasting promises.

Whether our world gets back to normal, or whether its foundation has been shaken into a new shape; whether my own world gets bigger or smaller; may it be as it was for Jesus just as he began to face his own end, I might be able to trust in God, through Jesus, for an eternity beyond this world, and may it be that this trust will carry me through the temporal blast of anything I face in this life. Amen.