

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2009

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Mark 13: 1-8

"When it feels our World has Ended!"

1. Mark 13, a little apocalypse

Our text in Mark 13: 1-8 has been described as a little apocalypse, and some question its value for our times. Apocalyptic language and imagery has probably fallen into the "non-sense" basket of our concerns because of the way it is used by extreme religious groups and movements. Such groups have narrowed their use of the word *apocalypse* to mean: the complete final destruction of the world; an event involving destruction or damage on an awesome or catastrophic scale (Oxford English Dictionary).

However, the word "apocalyptic" also means an event resulting in great loss or misfortune, involving calamity, disaster, or tragedy, producing times of great trauma. Recent catastrophes like the Asian Tsunami and 9/11 were devastating events comparable to ancient events like the war going on in Mark's community around CE 67 between Jewish rebels and the Romans; just like the great famine in Palestine in CE 50; and the earthquake of Pompeii in 61-62 CE.

Apocalyptic literature was a popular vehicle in the 100 years before the time of Jesus as well as during the first century of the early church, created to interpret current events. (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 326)

"In Ezra IV we have a document preserved by an apocalyptic-oriented community which offers hope to a covenant people in the face the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans."
(Howard C Kee, in Ched Myers, 326)

Without such writings and our story in Mark 13, human individuals and groups become isolated by events which overwhelm them to such a degree that it feels like the end of the world. At one time or other, each of us has experienced events and losses, which have felt like our world has ended. Apocalyptic stories enable us in community to process, interpret, support each other, and give hope. Otherwise, trauma produced by events both overwhelms our whole being and quietly rages on into intergenerational trauma.

2. When it feels like the world has ended and we are alone!

Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* graphically narrates the collective, intergenerational trauma produced by slavery for African-American people. Sethe is a slave who commits infanticide because her child is part of her and not an alien culture that treats her nation and her children brutally.

... her maternal identification is so complete that it allows Sethe to take the life of her baby because she believes that child to be "part of her" still. Thus when the slave catchers come to recapture Sethe and her children and return them to slavery in the South, Sethe "collected every bit of her life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine" and attempted to kill them all; she succeeded in killing one-the nursing baby who returns in the bold of Beloved. (Jean Wyatt, *Risking Difference*, 68f)

Toni Morrison's novel shocks us to see the apocalyptic nature of the dehumanising results of slavery. A loving mother is so isolated and broken by a dominant culture that the only way she knows how to love her children is to protect them by taking their life! This breaks the heart of God! And it breaks the human heart! For me, this story acts to reveal and motivate the need for compassionate community in our faith and practice.

As well, what Sethe cannot protect her daughter Denver from, a daughter who did not experience slavery, is the intergenerational transmission of such trauma. And this manifests itself socially, bodily and psychologically. Denver exhibits symptoms of trauma survivors, and she is mute for a few years.

In a less intense manner, my Russian Australian parents and their friends, who constantly talked about the war and their fear of being returned to Russia, transmitted their trauma onto me. I had anxieties and a sense of lack of safety that had no real object. This was never processed directly by the church.

3. We are even more alone when others avoid our story!

Jesus shares the journey of his followers as they experience their apocalyptic moments and fears. He forms them into a reflective and sharing community of shared. Unlike the experience of isolated people like Sethe, Denver, and immigrants and their children. Like Jesus, Toni Morrison accompanies her people by writing a novel to enable them to process their past pain.

In the movie from Imre Kertesz' Nobel Prize winning novel, *Fateless*, we meet 14 yr-old Gyuri Koves. He is a young Hungarian Jew who tries to make sense of his apocalyptic experiences in German concentration camps. Gyuri is optimistic even with the sheer outward horror and brutal treatment that shatters the viewer.

... a group of prisoners, forced to stand for hours in formation for fear of being shot or beaten, are viewed from above as they sway like seaweed submerged beneath churning water. ...

While everything unfolds from the boy's point of view, everything also plays out with the same benumbed inevitability. Never quite able to bring his emotions in line with his perceptions ... Gyuri filters everything. (Geoff Pevere, *Movie Critic*)

Yet, the ultimate horror is Gyuri's return to Budapest when the war is over. His ghostly appearance, a skeletal face and a starved body, on his first public appearance in a tram, attracts initial sympathetic clichés followed by awkward silence and avoidance.

This avoidance and silence in the face of human pain is a common human tendency, even when we face small deaths, small apocalyptic moments. When my partner and I separated a few years ago, my emotional pain was initially unbearable. I longed for people in the church to share it sensitively and mutually. Hardly a male was willing to do so, while women around me did so with grace and compassion – they saved my emotional life in those years.

4. Forming community to process our end-of-the-world experiences

Our story in Mark 13: 1-8 does not provide easy answers or escape from apocalyptic experiences. As Ched Myers says:

“Jesus will not give the promise of heavenly intervention but a sermon on how to read “signs on earth” – a sermon on political discernment directed at the historical moment.” (Ched Myers, 330)

Rather, Jesus provides relationship and creates compassionate and shared community in which we are enabled to process, interpret, support, and give hope to those times when it feels like our world is falling apart or ending.

In Mark 13: 1-4, the disciples are visually bewildered and overcome by the impressive structure and size of the Temple. For them as Jewish Christians, the power of God was deeply associated with the Temple. Jesus sits with them and processes the radical change they must undergo; to let go of the Temple, to realise it could not be equated with the power of God. He does not ridicule their perceptions, or ignore their romanticism of their church. He leads them to understand, to reflect on the new path of faith without clinging to a certain way of church or tradition. They would experience this as a small death. It is hard to let go of the way church has been for you.

Without this apocalyptic story telling, listening and processing we will not hear and recognise the emerging hope and the birth pangs of a new life. As the boy in *The Lorax* could not understand the value of the seed until he had really heard the story of devastation and how it emerged, so too we must travel deeply together and be empowered to give up our preconceptions and attachments to our reserve, to give up our power and attachment to the way things have always been. Only then can we see where we may still be clinging to our little deaths, only then can we see where God is leading us, in our lives, in our church live, and in our life together in society.