

Hebrews 10:11-25

Mark 13:1-8

Remembrance is about telling stories. When we remember together something that happened to other people, we recognise our relationship with them. We decide that we are part of the same story as the people who we are remembering. A story called “St Mark’s Church” or “the United Kingdom” or “Western Democracy”.

Any story needs a beginning, a middle and an end. And any change to the end completely transforms the whole thing. Our relationship with the past— as with any relationship— continues to change. “Age shall not weary them” but we change, and so, what it means to “remember them” changes too.

Over previous months, as the Taliban has taken over Afghanistan, there have been reports of increasing numbers of service men and women suffering from mental ill health. Perhaps, part of this, is that some have found it harder to build stories that made sense of all those 20 years of western occupation had meant for their lives and for the people of Afghanistan. Their past hadn’t changed but their memory— and lives— has been transformed by a new ending to the stories through which they understand— through which they remember— that past.

When we gather to remember the First and Second World Wars, we can tell a story that ends with a present and the future for which we are grateful, better than the alternative. Even so, the sheer scale of the devastation confronts us with things that we are unable to make sense of but nevertheless cannot ever forget.

So, the ending of the story structures our memory and through our memory, our lives. Therefore, the question this morning is: where can we find an ending that lets us remember honestly and confidently?

In our gospel passage, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. In doing so, he predicts a crisis of Israel’s memory.

As the disciples celebrate the temple, they are celebrating it as the happy ending of a story. Delivered from Egypt, established a kingdom, exiled to Babylon, returned to rebuild the temple, living under occupation now but they still have the temple. They can still remember God’s promise of deliverance at the temple. It is the end of the story— now and in the future they imagine.

But then Jesus tells them that it will be destroyed.

Jesus is not plunging his disciples into instability. He is letting them know that the stability they project onto the temple never existed. If it will not survive wars, earthquakes, and famines then it has never been a sufficient end to the story. We cannot narrate our lives on the basis on something that will not last. “The end is still to come.”

The writer to the Hebrews, probably writing before the destruction of the temple, puts the problem this way:

“And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.”

The disciples might be able to tell stories that justify the temple’s importance and its beauty, but the temple could never justify them. It cannot make them good.

When we remember we tell stories and every story needs an end.

When you tell the story of your life, what is the end to which that story leads?

Is it you meeting someone?

Is it you doing something?

Is it you being somewhere?

And when you think about those things— whether it be family, job, reputation or something else— is there a bit of you that looks to them to justify yourself? To offer meaning to your life? To make the past tidier than it was? I can’t be the only one tempted to think:

Look at this relationship, this job, this character trait. That means I have lived a meaningful and good life. And sure, there’s been hard bits but the sacrifices are worth it because they have been offered at the temple of intimacy or success or virtue.

May we hear the words of Jesus this morning: “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” And that feels particularly significant to say to this group of people, this is a congregation full of impressive people in an impressive part of an impressive city with “large stones” and “large buildings”. But “all will be thrown down.”

Perhaps, that’s not news to you. Some of us came here wearing the rubble of former temples. That relationship which failed. That loved one who died. That opportunity that never quite came to pass. Remembering even good things can be painful in the shadow cast by loss. For you, the challenge isn’t that “all will be thrown down”, it is that Jesus says “do not be alarmed”. *Jesus, have you seen the world’s right now? Jesus, have you seen my life?*

And here, we begin to realise how strange it is that this time of year the Church spends so much time thinking about the dead. Because to remember the dead is to face the reality of death— our death. To remember them is to stand in solidarity with them as those who will die. It is to look directly at the wreckage and decay of the world. Doing so could overwhelm us. We might expect it, at the very least, to alarm us.

And it certainly would, unless “the end is still to come.”

Unless, no matter how devastating and totalising and persistent death may appear, it is not the end of the story.

Jesus Christ looks at the temple, looks at its destruction, looks at war and famine and earthquakes and says “the end is still to come.”

Jesus is here, now, this morning, by his Spirit. He addresses each of one of us. To each of us whatever our situation, whether in rubble or temple. And He says: "This is not the end. This is not your end. The end is still to come." All will be thrown down, do not be alarmed, the end is still to come.

How does he know?

Because he is the end. Jesus Christ is our end.

Because "by a single offering he has perfected for all time— all time— those who are sanctified." We are his. He has won us. We will return to him.

In Jesus, God has lived a fully human life, with all its pain and temptation and struggles and joy. He came to and for us. He exposed the false stability of our temples. In dying, he defeated death by offering "for all time a single sacrifice for sins". He absorbed the consequence of our having turned towards death and has opened the way of life. God loves you to death, through death and out the other side.

In the life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord, the end of the story has joined us in the middle. The future has broken into the present. So, we can look back and look forward honestly and with confidence. All will be thrown down, do not be alarmed, the end is still to come.

Because of Jesus, our story does not end with death, but our story has room for death. We can remember death without having to romanticise it or justify it or valorise it because it does not have the final word.

We do not have to pretend that everything happens for a reason.

We do not have to pretend that we are in control.

We do not have to hurt ourselves and one another, as we try to maintain an illusion.

We can celebrate the good things in our life, relieving them of the weight of being the ultimate thing in our life. Whether temple or rubble, our lives become places where we can encounter our true end. The future is still breaking in.

We can name and mourn the pain in all our lives, without having to explain it away. In the shadow of the cross, we can find a safe place to remember.

"Therefore, my friends, since we have **confidence** to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,

by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh),

and since we have a great high priest over the house of God,

let us approach with a **true** heart in full assurance of faith,

with our hearts **sprinkled clean** from an evil conscience and our bodies **washed** with pure water.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope **without wavering**, for he who has promised is faithful."

Jesus Christ is the end of our story. May we live— and remember— in his story.

Amen.