

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 18th November 2018**

Mark 13: 1 - 8

About four years ago I observed how much boys love knocking things down when they are toddlers. I'm certain girls enjoy doing that as well, but my observations were confined to boys. In toddler world things seem to be built for the sole purpose of being smashed to the ground, gleefully.

After a while, I observed that as small boys grow up – and no doubt girls as well – thankfully, they also start to enjoy building things up. Whether it is LEGO or Duplo or cardboard boxes, anything really, from about the age of three there is joy in building something; the bigger and higher, the greater the joy.

But still, back then I observed, no matter how satisfying is the building up of something, it never really compares to the delight when it comes time to knock it down and destroy it. There is in the manse a large, black, toy bull, that one member of the manse family has christened Crasher. Crasher's only purpose in toy-life is to live up to his name.

Today, I observe also that whereas it used to be the case that in young life it was really only physical, material things that could be built up and crashed down, by about five years old building up and crashing includes abstract things, like confidence for example.

It is hard, but far from impossible to build up a child's confidence, but I've observed that once let out in to this world of ours in order to learn, to make friends, to start making your way in life it is all too easily for that confidence to be sent crashing down.

Much of our world is like that, for everyone. Who didn't enjoy watching the building up of the wonderful new bridge across the Forth, the Queensferry Crossing. Crowds gather too when something has to be pulled down, especially if it is tall: tower blocks, for example, like those across in Sighthill in 2011, or in 2015 the Cockenzie Power Station chimneys.

As in toddler world, in the adult world, although buildings and other constructions are built with a sense of purpose, they don't always come down with that same consideration, after all buildings aren't always as safe and stable as they look. Whether it is accidents, like the fire that ravaged twice the Glasgow School of Art, or the tragedies of the Grenfell Tower and the Twin Towers in New York, what appears to be physical pillars of our society can be destroyed disastrously, suddenly and unexpectedly.

This physical destruction of what otherwise appears strong and stable isn't limited to what we build, it can affect even the earth that was created. The ground beneath our feet that feels so firm can shake, split, or erupt. That might not happen often in our country necessarily, but even here the changing environment brought about by a changing climate reminds us that we can't be certain that

the earth we depend upon will always provide for all our needs in ways we expect.

*'...there will be earthquakes in many places; there will be famines,' said Jesus.<sup>1</sup>*

Much like children emerging with some independence in to the world for the first time, the foundations of our society can also be shaken in ways that are less physical and more abstract. The foundations of our banking system, for example, depend on confidence built up over years, and when that confidence is lost, as we discovered in 2008, our world tilts alarmingly on its axis.

Political crises can feel the same; how confident do we feel about the political environment in the UK at the moment? Such abstract destruction can sometimes be a consequence of physical destruction. The destruction of the Twin Towers led to profound changes in American society and ours, which affected the world.

*For nation will make war upon nation, kingdom upon kingdom.<sup>2</sup>*

In our Gospel reading this morning we read of a famous example of a society that was brought to the verge of destruction by the destruction of a building.

*'Look, master, what huge stones! What fine buildings!'<sup>3</sup> said Jesus' disciples.*

If you go to Jerusalem today you can see with your own eyes those fine stones, which those disciples were looking at with their eyes in that reading. They are lying in heap in the Old City of Jerusalem next to what we call today the Wailing Wall.

And they are magnificently huge, representative of the magnificent temple that they supported, but now lying in a tumbled heap like the end of a game of Jenga.

*Jesus said, 'You see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'*

He was right, they were. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of August in the year 70, the Roman Legions besieging Jerusalem, broke in t the city, and destroyed everything. Those stones you see today in Jerusalem lie in exactly the same place that they fell 1,948 years and 11 weeks ago last Thursday.

The destruction of the city and in particular the Temple in Jerusalem was not only a fabric crisis for the religion that had built it, it was a social one, an existential one. It changed forever the nature of both Judaism and Christianity.

*With these things the birth pangs of the new age begin.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 13: 8

<sup>2</sup> Mark 13: 8

<sup>3</sup> Mark 13: 1

<sup>4</sup> Mark 13: 8

Both Judaism and Christianity had to find a way to survive without buildings that could come crashing down, without a state that could be invaded, shaken, in a world where there would always be the threat – the rumour - of war. To survive, these religions built their foundations on abstract things, on relationships: both Pharisaic Judaism, which had the Law at its heart not the Temple, and Christianity, which had Jesus at its heart, the destruction of the Temple offered them opportunities to flourish.

*'With these things the birth pangs of the new age begin.'*

Judaism built its future relationship on words, the words of the Bible; it is these words that lie at the heart of the Jewish faith. Christianity built its relationship on a person, Jesus Christ.

Relationships are fragile, of course, but words are portable, they can be written down, they can be memorised. Relationships with people are more fragile than relationships with words, but Christianity is built on a relationship with a person who survived his own death, and spiritually lives on in our lives.

Just as society was fragile almost 2,000 years ago, just as lives were fragile back then, so today, the building that is our society is fragile, susceptible to, amongst other things, environmental, political, social, and economic shocks. Today, as ever, the lives that we build in this fragile world are fragile themselves: we can never be sure that our employment; our health; our wealth are as safe and secure as we would like them to be.

When the ground beneath our feet shakes, when the buildings we have built are broken down, when tragedy strikes, a new age begins in our society; our lives are transformed; they become something different from what they were. Events such as these can appear and feel devastating, but whether or not this new age will ultimately feel cursed or blessed with a sense of holiness depends on what we had originally put our faith in to build our lives or our society in the first place.

For example, a house and a home is important, but you wouldn't want that to be your reason for living. Our health is important, but we wouldn't want to base the value of our lives wholly on the likelihood that we will remain fit and healthy throughout our lives.

A society needs a strong economy, but we wouldn't want to build on the assumption that our society will always find a way to share that wealth fairly. Democratic politics is a fair way to govern, but you'll eventually just feel betrayed and disillusioned if you believe our democracy will always deliver the government you desire. The ground beneath our feet feels firm and reliable today, but we wouldn't want to literally build on the assumption that the climate will never change.

The question before Jesus' disciples almost 2,000 years ago, and before everyone in this world is, what can we count on, what can we trust, what can we put our

faith in that will survive even the worst of events. Those first disciples thought it was a building, but as important as that building was, they were wrong.

Jesus' blunt declaration that it would all come crashing down was one of his ways of reinforcing his point made to them throughout his life that only by building our society, and our personal lives, on a relationship with him, a relationship based on the love, the peace, the justice, the mercy he showed to others ensures that whatever shocks befall us personally or as a community we will emerge from them into a new age, a transformed life, with a retained spirit of holiness about us and our society.

For Jesus disciples' though, and for us, holding on to the idea that good, holy relationships are the best way to see us through when the huge stones and fine buildings of our lives come crashing down wasn't quite enough to calm their fears and keep them focused on their relationship with their Master. So, Jesus offered them, and he offers us, three pieces of advice.

'Take care that no one misleads you,' he said in verse five of our reading. When times are at their darkest and most worrying, people tend to grasp at any offer of hope or salvation, from any number of charlatans or strong men who appear to offer salvation. Remember that when things are at their worst, your judgement is not always at its best, so be careful who you follow.

'Don't be alarmed,' he said in verse 7 of our reading. In the depths of despair or in the midst of a national catastrophe, when there are rumours of conflict and the noise of battle can be heard, don't be alarmed, stay calm. These things happen in a crisis, don't panic.

'With these birth pangs a new age will begin,' he said in verse 8 of our reading. Danger and threats and suffering are inevitable in life, nothing lasts for ever, but as terrible as things get they are rarely the end, or at least not immediately. Rarely do we not have any choices to make. More often than not they mark a change in circumstances over which we still have some control or influence.

Street prophets have a habit of proclaiming that the end of the world is nigh, and that prophecy is most often based on passages like that which we read from the Gospel of Mark this morning. They may preach that, but Jesus didn't. He said, if your relationships are right; if you don't let yourself be misled in a crisis; if you don't panic; and if you remember that if you have built holy relationships with others during the stable, safe times then most likely after a crisis something new will most likely emerge and you'll find salvation if you have faith in relationships built around Jesus Christ.