

November 18, 2018
The 26th Sunday After Pentecost
Mark 13:1-8
Rev. Chip Whitacre

Several of you have asked me what I did while I was away so I thought I'd start with that this morning. Most of you have probably heard that Lynne and I spent six weeks in England. We spent four of those weeks in Yorkshire in the north and two in Kent in the southeast. We walked a lot. We spent time with old friends and made some new ones. We visited historical sites of all sorts. We went to parish churches and local libraries and backroads in search of our families' histories. We didn't find any famous relatives, but neither did we find any infamous ones. We visited a couple pretty impressive castles. We also visited several of England's great cathedrals, York, Durham, Canterbury, and Winchester. We attended church at the local parish church near where we stayed in York and both of the parish churches in Brentwood where our friend is Vicar. We drove on eight lane motorways, four lane highways and country lanes that were six feet wide. With the aid of the GPS in our car we were both lost and found on more than one occasion. We came back with a new-found respect for the roundabout. And afternoon tea. With a scone. Lathered with clotted cream and topped with a dollop of jam. We also came back members of two local libraries, a local historical archive, a local museum trust and the English Heritage Society. And we came back refreshed and with a profound sense of gratitude. For safe travels and the simple fact that we were able to take such a trip to begin with.

I've been telling whoever will listen that we left on a trip and returned from a journey. Perhaps even a pilgrimage, even though a pilgrimage was not our intention. Our encounters with our church and its history in England were enriching to say the least. We experienced everything from a parish Eucharist with ten in attendance to Evensong with three hundred in attendance. We visited the tombs of Augustine, Bede and Cuthbert, Cedd, and Swithun. That is to say we were exposed to the long history of the Christian tradition in England. And to the history of the church to which we now belong. Today a significant part of that history is only partly visible in the ruins of the many priories and abbeys that dot the countryside. It was actually the memory of those ruins that shaped my first reaction to the reading from Mark's Gospel this morning.

They were all once thriving monastic communities many hundreds of years old. Augustine arrived in Canterbury in 597. Hilda founded the abbey at Whitby in 657. At its peak, Rievaulx Abbey had as many as 650 monks. These communities were the source of religious training and education as well as worship and service to the community. Many of them had immense land holdings. Which made them significant contributors to the economic vitality of the area. They were incredibly wealthy. Which is where Henry VIII comes in. His decision to disband all the monastic communities and seize their treasuries solved his need for money and his desire to eliminate Roman church's influence.

Unfortunately, the seizures included the lead roofs on the buildings, which left the wooden beams and stone walls exposed to the elements. So, today much of what remains is the outline of the former buildings visible only as the foundations. In some cases, the walls that surrounded the high altar and held the great east window are still standing along with a few columns. But for the most part the rest of the structures are almost completely eroded away. In the end, Henry squandered the money on a war with France which ended in disaster.

But here's the interesting part. The local churches he left in place are still there. Some of them are actually remnants of former abbey churches. The high altar and surrounding monastic buildings at Bolton Priory were destroyed. But the nave was left in place and it houses an active parish church that is still there today. The sign outside the entrance reminds those who enter that Christian worship has been offered daily there since the year 1150. Through the hardships of daily life, invasions, wars, famine, periodic outbreaks of plague, and other deadly diseases the community has gathered together there to pray and worship for almost 900 years. I have to think of it as a living example of what Jesus is saying to his followers. Buildings will inevitably fall down. Put your trust in the things that will last.

When I read this lesson with my Friday morning group yesterday, their first response was; "it sounds just like today." And it does indeed sound a lot like the world we inhabit today. While scholars don't agree on where the Gospel of Mark was compiled, they generally do agree that it was around the year 70 CE. The historical record shows it was a time of great unrest in Judea. The Jewish revolt against the Roman presence was disastrous. The breakdown of communal authority led to the spread of violence and a Roman army of 60,000 surrounding the city of Jerusalem. There was infighting and betrayal and murder in the besieged city. A time when people did indeed have to be on their guard. Eventually, the Romans broke through the walls of the city. They killed or sent into slavery tens of thousands of its inhabitants and destroyed the Temple. It is easy to imagine Mark using some of Jesus' teachings about betrayal and persecution to reflect on this most central event. To encourage the community of Christians to stay the course and remind them that Jesus is the true Messiah.

It's also not a story about when the end will come. Clearly, Jesus is talking about more than buildings in his speech to his disciples. Just as the destruction of the abbeys in 16th century England was intended to undermine the teaching and authority of Rome, the destruction of the Temple was intended to destroy the center of religious and civil authority in Jerusalem. The goal was nothing short of a complete shift in authority. Henry claimed ultimate authority over the church in England, and he used it to grant himself the annulment he was seeking. And further to undermine the authority of those who opposed him. Likewise, the Roman Emperor acted to destroy the religious and civil authority in Judea in order to ensure his own complete authority. This is not a story about the destruction of buildings even though this lesson has a cause and effect feel to it. It was actually the other way around. It was the breakdown of authority and the ensuing internal chaos that caused the conditions for the destruction of the Temple.

I think Jesus is telling his disciples that there will always be times of social turmoil and conflict. That those times can and will destroy norms and the institutions that uphold them. He is warning them to be vigilant and careful who they choose to follow. Because there will always be those who will take advantage of the turmoil to achieve their own ends. That can be a bit disheartening for us to consider. And therein lies the challenge for us. If we accept that as truth, then there is a risk of becoming cynical and passive as a result. To continue loving humanity even as our worst behavior is on constant display is not easy. Jesus is telling his disciples to take the long view. To not fall prey to those who would set themselves up as the authority in the moment. Ultimately, this is a story about who we will allow to have authority over our lives. Those who accept God as the authority that governs their lives will find comfort in times of conflict and betrayal and strength in times of persecution. They will endure. After all, almost two thousand years after the destruction of the Temple the Roman Empire is a speck in the rearview mirror of history. And Jewish people are still gathering at the western wall to pray every day. And almost five hundred years after Henry VIII the parish of Bolton Priory is still worshipping daily. Amen.