

18 November 2012. Hebrews 10:11-14 and 19-25. Mark 13:1-8

It's been a year of great memorable moments. Who can forget the opening ceremony of the Olympics when the Queen jumped out of a helicopter with James Bond? Both of them iconic figures in their own way. In some sense both of them represent order. We expect the Queen to remain unchanging, being a point of security. Bond's role is actually to maintain that security.

Well, the Temple in Jerusalem was an iconic building. It was massive. At the time of Jesus' visit recounted here, King Herod had nearly completed a rebuilding project. The stones, as the disciples noted were huge. Many of the walls were covered in gold and those that weren't were so white, that when the Temple was seen from a distance, it was said to look like a mountain covered with snow. It was built to impress, to show off Herod's wealth. It also gave to the Jewish nation a sense of security. It was the place where God lived. It was unique, the place where heaven and earth met. Yet what Jesus saw was its' glitzy religiosity. It was the place described by the writer of Hebrews where the priest stood day after day offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. Jesus warned that despite its apparent strength and stability, it would not stand over time. In fact that actually happened 70 years later and the Temple has never since been rebuilt.

Jesus was not just warning his disciples of terrible times to come; he is warning us too about how we should respond to false teaching, to wars and to natural disasters. Although he won't have said in the way that Corporal Jones did, what he is saying here is 'don't panic'. Don't be led astray, don't be disheartened, don't panic. Or to put it more positively, do remember what Jesus did and follow that, do remain hopeful and do remember that wars and disasters are simply part of the state of this fallen world and don't mean that the end is nigh. Charles Dickens words: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' sums up the fact that every generation experiences an ebb and flow of good and bad. Jesus does not invite us to look for any signs of an end to this world, instead he encourages us to persevere.

We watch in horror as yet again parts of the world descend into chaos, people flee their homes, see them destroyed, and those who survive have to decide between despair and hope, having lost any semblance of security. I cannot imagine how that feels.

Like the majority of us here, I am more likely to fall into the opposite camp, where I am in danger of becoming nonchalant. When my security, health, wealth and happiness, seem to come only too easily, then I can take or leave following Christ. And then when alarming events come my way, I buckle. If I don't have the experience of being faithful in small things, in times of ease, then I don't have the experience to be faithful under pressure. At those times I can become disheartened, led astray and like Dad's Army will run around fruitlessly shouting 'don't panic' or sit morosely saying 'we're all doomed'.

How do I avoid that nonchalance that leads in time to fear?

The reading we heard from the letter to the Hebrews gives some very sound advice.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.

This could be heard as the answer to the question every youth leader will have heard many times. Why do I have to go church? Simply because the Bible says so; it's here in Hebrews. Paul Langham's new translation of the New Testament puts it this way: 'Let's not give up on the Church habit'. But I think that's a bit of a cop out to just say the Bible says so. It's a question I often ask myself. And it goes to the heart of the other question about being nonchalant about my faith. It's easy to think that I can just as well worship God when out for a good walk on a sunny Sunday. I can remember as I

walk that God is good. I can use it as a time to pray for others. If I've downloaded some Bible readings from the Bible Society website I can even listen to the same passages that are being heard in the church service. And I'd miss the sermon!

What else would I miss? What else is important about coming together to worship and about spending time together afterwards?

Hebrews suggests that it is the time when together we draw near to God and focus our hearts on him. 'Our hearts' being our thoughts, our will, emotions and character. It's a time when we encourage each other in love. Now I can't be encouraged by others when I'm walking by myself! It's a time when we motivate one another to practical acts of service. If I stay away from any meaningful involvement with other Christians, then I can't see where I might be helpful nor can I show anyone else what they can do for me. I become increasingly isolated. I limit the opportunities I give God to heal me. I miss out on the deep care and concern that others can give. I also miss out on the reproof and warning that must come with being part of a loving community. The dynamics of spiritual development are wider than reading learned tomes. Spiritual development grows as it is tested, in Christian communities and in secular places. I can never rely on 'been there, done that'. That is the heart of nonchalance. In the same way that we experience the grief of bereavement differently each time it comes; the way I dealt with suffering in the past cannot be relied on to be the way I will deal with it in the future. I need the questions of those who are starting their Christian journey as much as I need the settled answers of those in the middle of the journey and the questioning that seems to come again with greater maturity. I also need the love and care of others, often others outside my immediate small close group of family and friends; often they can see more clearly what my needs are than those closer to me.

Coming together is, I suggest, much more than just being in the same place, reading the same words. If we are to encourage one another in love and good deeds, then we have to get to know each other. To be prepared to be vulnerable with each other. Not to just present our best side; to smile and say everything is fine. It's also good not to moan or criticise those who are doing their best. We also have to accept that others are different from us and that we each yearn for love to be expressed in different ways. We have been brought together by God. We each need 'spiritual friends' with whom we can share the strengths and the joy that God has given each of us. These will be friends who will hold us to account, from whom we learn, bit by bit, how to love and how to persevere. By practising my faith within a Christian community, being accountable to those who expect me to be both serious and excited about it, not nonchalant, then I lay down foundations that will enable me not to panic when trouble comes.

Our vision tells of transforming lives through following Christ in love and service. We can't do that in isolation. The Temple in Jerusalem is a heap of stones. Jesus has replaced the sacrifices given to God in the Temple. We are each now the place where God's Holy Spirit lives; the temple of the Holy Spirit. May we not grow isolated from one another. May we persevere together as we experience the best of times and the worst of times, learning to seek out the light and hope of Christ.

As we continue with this practice of meeting together it might be good to ask ourselves:

To whom am I giving encouragement by my presence, my actions and my words? Am I receiving encouragement by being faithful to this community of faith?

Amen

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