

SERMON AT MASS: SECOND SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT 2015.

If you were holding a copy of Mark's Gospel you would be able to see the context within which this reading is set.

You would know that the last part of the ministry of Jesus is concerned with the journey towards the holy city, Jerusalem, the vision of peace.

And that the first thing Jesus did after he entered the Jerusalem in triumph was to go into the Temple.

He went to the Temple the next day and the next.

The episode ends with Jesus seeing the woman putting two small coins into the Temple treasury, *all she had to live on*.

And it was at this point, as they were leaving the Temple, that one of the disciples made this remark: *Look at the size of those stones, Master! Look at the size of those buildings!*

The tourist-like enthusiasm is immediately put down: *You see these great buildings? Not a single stone of them will be left on another: everything will be destroyed.*

It could of course be understood as a piece of straightforward and accurate prediction.

In one sense it was, for in the year 70 the Temple was destroyed by the Romans.

The site is now occupied by a Muslim shrine.

Jesus reinforces this view by a prediction of turmoil and conflict, with earthquakes and famines.

But this, he says, is the beginning of the birth-pangs.

Hardly anything in the Gospels is as it first seems.

Closer study, prayerful reading and liturgical proclamation reveal depths which take us closer to God as he is in his dealings with his creatures.

The passage just read has often been used to scare people into

submission.

It is often connected with the expected *Rapture*, much placarded in some sections of the church in the United States.

The website *Rapture ready* provides a concise explanation:

The rapture is an event that will take place sometime in the near future. Jesus will come in the air, catch up the Church from the earth, and then return to Heaven with the Church.

I'm not suggesting that we should fail to take seriously the message of this passage.

On the contrary, we all need to be reminded that in the Church we are not dealing with childish fantasies and sober moral tales, but with the living God.

The living God who first called the people we know as Abraham and who now calls us.

But I am suggesting that in this exercise we take seriously Jesus of Nazareth, who in the new alliance between God and his people makes the call of God even more compelling, not to say irresistible to those who recognise who and what he is.

Many expositions of the Christian faith vary between the shock tactics of the rapture exponent and the woolly moralism of the peddlers of a purely social gospel.

All of this can stop people realising how shocking, how radical, is the nature and teaching of this man, Jesus of Nazareth.

How he proclaims, by his very presence and teaching in the Temple a new order, where God on earth resides not in a building made by human hands, but in a human person, conceived in and born from the womb of a woman.

It was as Jesus sat teaching in the Temple that he told the story of the vineyard, where the tenants refused to give the owner his share of the

fruit.

They killed the servants he sent, and when he sent his son they killed him too.

Jesus then quotes the psalms against his detractors: *It was the stone rejected by the builders that became the keystone. This was the Lord's doing and it is wonderful to see.*

The building analogy reappears at the end of the Temple episode: *Not a single stone will be left standing on another.*

But *this* stone, the one rejected by the builders and now the keystone, will remain.

This man has put himself in place of the Temple.

And this struck at the heart of the cult that lay at the centre of Jewish religion at that time.

The charge that was made at his trial before the Sanhedrin was that he had claimed he would destroy the Temple made by human hands and in three days build another not made by human hands.

And when he was asked whether he was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One, Jesus replied *I am*.

That and the application to himself of the sacred name of God – I am – was the last straw.

These shocking revelations are the heart of our tradition: that God should dwell among us as one of us.

That God in this man should submit to death for our sake and rise from it to new and eternal life.

That through this man God should offer eternal life to all who believe in him.

That all of this is not reward or bribe but gift.

That the enterprise of Christian life is both the realisation that this is true and the working out of its consequences for our future existence as well as for our life together now.

The jaw drops, as indeed it should.

This is what God is like?

Here, among us.

Not shut up, safe, in that building?

Here, heart beating with ours, sharing our life, joys, sorrows, despair, death?

Calling us to live with abandon in the light of this?

Sustaining us with his presence?

Feeding us with his very self?

Breaking down barriers by placing himself with the criminals, the outcasts, the failures?

And ultimately being revealed as the ruler of the universe, signified here by alarming predictions of his final return to the earth.

It doesn't matter that events didn't unfold *before this generation has passed away*.

What does matter is the conviction that this is the means whereby the loving rule of God is finally established on the earth.

On the feast of Christ the King next week we acknowledge again the mystery of our Lord's victory and loving rule.

And at every Eucharist his promised return becomes a reality in the heart of this community.