

Building Blocks

1 Samuel 1:4-20; Mark 13:1-8

A week, as they say, is a long time in politics. After the sense of occasion and purpose of last week's national and international events around the World War One Centenary, last week's endless bickering, posturing, statement and counterstatement around the Brexit deal, or the beginning of a deal, has left most of us feeling drained. What is anyone to make of what has been happening? What is the person of faith to pray about when most simply want to throw up their hands in despair?

I found myself in London on a work visit, and it was hard to avoid the topic. From the cab drivers, to senior civil servants, to people in the hospitality industry, to other clergy, there was hardly another topic to be discussed. The media, trying to spin gold from straw, has not exactly helped the situation when clear minds and calm heads are needed.

Whilst we may groan and wish it would all go away, this utter mess, and it is an utter mess, is not going to go away quickly or easily. Voices on both sides are seeing to that. Whatever your politics and your views on the politics of the Prime Minister, and can think of few occasions in recent history when a single politician has been the subject of such abuse, pressure and ill-will. She remains a woman of faith, trying to do her best with a situation that is not of her own making, and made worse by people who do not, on any side, appear to have a practical, workable, sensible solution.

From the great establishments that have gone to make up our nation over centuries, it all looks perilously close to coming crashing down around our ears. What is worse, there are plenty to offer criticism and objections and, say what a terrible state the nation is in, but when pressed few, it seems to me, have anything substantial to offer instead. A change of Prime Minister will not resolve the issue. A change of Government will not take away the problem. A People's Vote, depending on what it is we might be asked on, might clarify some things, but will surely underline the divisions and national uncertainties that have been ramped up by irresponsible

individuals for years. We live in a time of wars and rumour of wars, and not the one we commemorated ending last week. It is desperate.

The Church, nationally and locally, is facing serious challenges. Nationally, and locally, falling numbers of committed, regular worshippers, and the knock-on effect of shrinking financial resources is reaching a critical level. Too many people expect a great deal of return for very little input, and assume that a smaller number of individuals will carry on the same amount of work so that everyone can enjoy the kind of Church we all think we need and deserve. In our own congregation serious issues are on the doorstep about the kind of future we will see if we fail to address the level of regular financial giving and resourcing, which is not as good as it should be, and issues around volunteering when fewer people are being stressed out by increasing demands from many who have unrealistic notions about what the Church must do and be, based on out-dated ideas about the kind of community and world we live in. If our Church is not only going to survive but thrive, changes in attitude, commitment, giving and inclusion of the community in all of our activities is going to have to come. No one else is going to do it for us, but we ourselves. We will need to become the change we want to see, whatever our age, or depth or shallowness of faith. We have a massive resource here, but it requires massive commitment to be sustained and developed, and too few are carrying out the work, and too few are making the significant financial commitment that is going to move us from survival mode to thriving mode.

Am I sounding a little apocalyptic? Yes I am. I've struggled with what to say all week and it took me to last night to be brought back, again, inevitably, challengingly, hopefully, to the words of our founder, Jesus of Nazareth.

Mark's gospel sets Jesus in the Temple, at the heart of the Jewish faith. Jesus had taught in the Temple, urging any who would listen to Him that the heart of a living, sacrificial, vibrant faith was based on a traditional but ever-adapting understanding of God and belief. "The Lord our God is one; you shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all

your mind, and with all your strength.” I wonder if Jesus paused and looked around at those who were listening, begging the question, “Do you? Is this true for you?”

He went on, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Maybe another pause, and a looking around, and another unspoken question. “Do you? Is this true for you?”

Coming out of the Temple with His followers, all suitably impressed with what the boss had said, despite the fractious arguments of the Scribes and Pharisees, the disciples looked at the wonderful stones and building of the Temple. It was a stunning structure, atop its hill. Built, destroyed, then rebuilt, all saw it and were amazed. Every year pious Jews would say, “Next year, Jerusalem”, if they were not able to attend a service there.

But in 70AD it was razed to the ground by the Romans, and has never fully been rebuilt. “There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down”, Jesus prophesied. If the stones of a Temple, or a Parliament, or a Church, and not maintained, cherished, enhanced, made to be more than just bricks and mortar; if there is no heart to them, no spirit to them, no point to them, then they will crumble and fall. Through destruction, through neglect. But down they will come. The building blocks of Temple, Parliament and Church are not made of stone; they are made of ideas and hopes, of dreams and commitment, of sacrifice, of faith, of hope, of love.

Society, the world in which we live, is made up of different building blocks. Some are things like economics, business, social care, the arts, medicine and law. But fundamentally, society, the world, is made up of the building blocks of humanity. Society is built by people, with people, for people.

What would be the building blocks you would use to build a society that was fit for purpose? What would be the components that would be necessary? What would matter most to you? What would you be willing to sacrifice? How would you seek a consensus? How would you plan to maintain and sustain what you believe, and what matters most to you?

It matters in time of war and rumour of war, and in the ugly and fearful politics of C21st Britain. Breaking decades old ties with Europe, flawed though Europe undoubtedly is, has created

unimaginable and unintended consequences. Talking of breaking centuries old ties within the United Kingdom does the same. People are free to choose, of course. They must realise that to do nothing, to change nothing, is equally not an option.

Trying to make sense of what to say to you I turned back to the two Bible passages for today. First the long, beautiful Song of Hannah. The woman desperate for a child, but barren. Facing mockery, abuse, a bitter old age alone, for her, despite the love of her husband, a good man. She did not give up; she prayed, she sang, and out of the barren time and the persevering time, God heard her, and she bore a son, Samuel, one of Israel's greatest prophets. Where there was no hope, faith and perseverance and prayer found God, and found an answer.

And I turned back to Jesus, sitting on the Mount of Olives, seeing the outward beauty of Jerusalem, and its inner desolation, and despite its mighty stones, the prophecy of its tumbling down. And these were the birth pangs, and the hard times. But it **was** a birth, and out of the desperation, and the impossibilities, life came.

Mark wrote his gospel at the time when the Temple was destroyed, and the people of faith could not see the way out. How could they survive? Who would carry on the tradition? But out of the ashes, the barrenness, the poverty, the collapse, answers emerged. People reimagine. People reframe. People recommitted. People found hope and put it into action.

No quick fix. No polished messiah with all the answers. But reshaping, hard work, sacrifice making, honest appraisal, hopeful activity. It can be done; it will be done; we can do it; we will do it.

I have no answer to the Brexit mess, but I believe there are people on opposing sides who do have an answer between them, and the people need to keep pressure up and say, 'this will not do, there is another way, how can we, together, find it?' I have no answer to the Church's need for a radical action plan, but I do believe God has one, and we will find it when we work with God towards it; all of us; now.

Coming back in the taxi from the airport last week the Lithuanian taxi driver spotted my dog collar, and we talked about politics, Europe, Brexit, the state of the nation, the state of the

Church and more. It's a long way from Turnhouse. "How will it be fixed? How will we be saved?" he asked. And then, that young man, I don't know if he was a believer or not, said suddenly, "Maybe the second coming would help?"

"That would do it", I laughed. "But I've not been given any word about that just yet. So until then, we work, and we hope, and we pray, and we work again."

How do we survive the devastation? Things may seem to be falling apart. It may appear that anarchy has been loosed on the world, and faithlessness is rife. But the centre, Who is Jesus, will hold. And much to our amazement, we will discover that we have much we can do, and out of the barrenness, and the rubble, hope will emerge and be born amongst us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen