

18th November St Thomas Second Sunday before Advent

Readings:

Daniel 12.1-3 Mark 13 1-8

Hymns:

626 Ye holy angels bright

385 Be thou my guardian and my guide

308 Just as I am without on e plea

502 light's abode, celestial Salem

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit AMEN

Birthpangs or birth pains

I can remember being told whilst in labour that it is a happy positive pain – I don't think so. It doesn't always feel positive and fruitful to be in labour. So it is apt that Jesus should use the concept of birthpangs being necessary to deliver something new and different and wonderful.

It just seems a very long labour indeed which countless generations have endured and continue to endure with the wars and conflicts which have beset us since the beginning of time, will there ever be peace?

although we preach peace is it actually achievable? Do we really learn from the terror of war, the remembrance of which is at the heart of this season in the church.

There was a positive note struck with the opening of the Paris Peace Forum which met on the eve of Remembrance Sunday last Sunday 11th November, it was called by Emmanuel Macron and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with other national leaders, to convene annually to review actions and projects for peace. We just pray this Forum may flourish and achieve its goals.

In the words of the prophet Daniel in our Old Testament reading this morning, there will be a time of distress but the righteous can be assured of everlasting life beyond the end time.

Beyond that last Judgement which has been a popular subject for artists over the centuries. One of the most beautiful has to be the depiction of the Last Judgement by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel in Rome, you get a terrible neck ache trying to take it all in but it is worth it.

And whilst in France, we saw numerous ancient frescos depicting this scene, one of which was particularly interesting: in a church in a little village called Allemans du Dropt near Bergerac, there are some ancient murals depicting the Last Judgement. It is easy to make out a devilish fellow with a pointed tail and evil expression, on his back is a very large basket full of, wait for it, naked women, on the way to be tipped into the fires of hell. Not a happy sight.

In our Gospel reading Jesus is at pains to help his disciples understand what may happen in a future where they will be

without him, and they may experience the signs they interpret as the end of the age, he doesn't want them to jump to conclusions but to understand God's purpose is being worked out despite the chaos and the destruction they may witness

The context for this conversation is the mount of Olives. On leaving the Temple with Jesus the disciples have marvelled at the magnificence of the building, Jesus makes a prediction, he says to them that 'not one stone will be left here upon another'. This is not the first time such predictions have been made, the prophets Jeramiah and Micah both predicted the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem which was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE.

Once on the Mount of Olives Peter, James, John and Andrew take Jesus to one side to ask for an explanation as to why he is making such dramatic predictions of such a beautiful building. The view of which we could imagine as we visited the site during our 2013 pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We visited the Mount of Olives and looked out across the Kidron valley to the Temple Mount.

Jesus view would have been of the massive temple in all its magnificence. All that remains today is part of the vast stone platform on which the it was built and a section of the Western wall, known as the wailing wall, where devout Jews stand facing the stones to pray and to leave prayers written on little pieces of paper tucked into the brickwork. We had the privilege of spending time there with them.

Apparently the first century Jewish writer Josephus, described the outward face of the Temple as covered in plates of gold which reflected the sunlight so strongly that people could not bear to look at it. It had been enlarged and rebuilt by king Herod in 19 BC and was immense, the giant stones with which it was built were more than forty feet long and twelve feet wide.

Yet Jesus' predictions are proved correct and despite its impressive strength in AD70, 40 years after Jesus' Crucifixion, the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, who laid siege to the city of Jerusalem in response to the Jewish revolt. Josephus claims that over a million people died of starvation disease and violence and the Temple was burned and demolished.

Christ is at pains to point out to his disciples that such happenings are only the first painful twinges of labour with which they are to live, in the knowledge of God's greater plan. This may be the message for us from this reading, that although peace seems a long way off, God's plan is being worked out, we are a part of this plan as we strive to bring in that other kingdom, of justice and peace, and we are to continue to work towards it not giving up because of ongoing turmoil. In view of the current political chaos in the country this is a very welcome message!

We are to be a people of hope, optimism and determination, determination that despite set-backs we can make this precious world a better place for all to live in.

