



Leura Uniting Church
14 November 2021
Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev Dr William Emilsen

Our Church is located within the Country of the Dharug and Gundungurra peoples. We acknowledge their long and deep connection to this Country and the cultural significance of the many Aboriginal sites located within the Blue Mountains.

We pay respect to Elders past and present and pledge ourselves to the God-given task of reconciliation.

The Gathering of the People of God

CALL TO WORSHIP

Great and merciful God,
 we come before You in love and humility.

We come to worship You.

Creator God,
 You brought everything that we know,
 everything that we see,
 everything that we are,
 into being through Your Word.

We come to worship You.

Compassionate God,
 You are a God who gives love.
 You are a God who loves us so much
 that you sent Jesus to release us from our bondage.

We come to worship You.

Reconciling God,
 You are a God who desires peace for the world.
 In You all things will be reconciled.
 In You we become the Body of Jesus.
 In You rests our hope for the world.

In You rests our hope for the world. Amen.

GREETING

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
 the love of God,
 and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
 be with you all.

And also with you.

HYMN: 'Amazing Grace' (TIS 129)

Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)
 that saved a wretch like me!
 I once was lost, but now am found,
 was blind, but now I see.

As grace first taught my heart to fear
 so grace my years relieved;
 how precious did that grace appear
 the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares
 I have already come;
 God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
 and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
 his word my hope secures;
 he will my shield and portion be
 as long as life endures.

John Newton
 Public Domain

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING AND CONFESSIONThanksgiving

Let us spend some time in silence and reflection during which we bring to mind the ways in which God has blessed our lives and let us reflect on the things that we are thankful for at this moment in time.

(Silence)

Call to Confession

With confidence and humility,
 let us confess our sins to our merciful God.

Confession

We come before You
 aware that all of us fall short of Your Glory.
 We all make mistakes.
 We all struggle to love one another.

We often hurt others—
sometimes deliberately,
sometimes accidentally.

God of forgiveness hear our prayers.

Forgive us Lord for the times when we neglect You.
Forgive us for the times when we put ourselves before You
and the good of others.
Forgive us for the times when we damage ourselves
through our thoughts, words and actions.
Forgive us when we elevate ourselves above others,
especially those with whom we disagree
and those who are different to us.

God of forgiveness hear our prayers.

You call us to love God and our neighbour.
Forgive us for the times when we fall short of Your good desires.

We come before you knowing that You are a merciful God
and that Your grace makes it possible for us to love one another,
to be forgiven and reconciled with You and with one another.
Thanks you for the peace that comes with this promise.

God of forgiveness hear our prayers.

Assurance of Pardon

The good news in Christ is that when we face ourselves and God
with the awareness of our need,
we are given grace to grow,
and courage to continue the journey.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel.
In Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

The Liturgy of the Word

EPISTLE: Revelation 1:4b–8 (Dennis Christie)

GOSPEL: Mark 13:1–8 (Ross Neville)

May your word live in us, O God.
And bear much fruit to your glory.

SERMON 'When Things Fall Apart' (William Emilsen)

Mark 13:1–8 is about those distressing times when things falls apart. The expression 'things fall apart' comes from the Irish poet Willian Butler Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming' (1919) in which he describes post-war Europe with its food shortages, riots, poverty, strikes, protests, thousands upon thousands of dislocated people, the Easter Uprising and the beginning of the Irish War of Independence, the Spanish flu pandemic and the unfolding Russian Revolution. Many of you will recall some of the poem's memorable lines:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Now, as the world is wrenched out of joint by the coronavirus pandemic and the 'Climate Crisis', it would seem as though our generation, too, is experiencing the same apocalyptic shudders that Yeats did 100 years ago. Only as recent as last Wednesday night, the WHO's Worldometer recorded almost 252 million people infected with Covid 19 and over 5 million deaths (equivalent to the population of Sydney.) The global pandemic is proving to be a tough challenge.

The Climate Crisis is proving an even tougher challenge for the world with its potential for more deaths and grief, more refugees, more hardship, and more poverty. We now know that our planet is in heaps of trouble. Our oceans, agriculture and climate patterns are under threat, with staggering implications for the world. And regardless of what you might think about Boris Johnson's outrageous stunts and bombastic language, he has certainly left no one in any doubt about the seriousness of global warming. In his opening speech to the COP26 Conference in Glasgow, Johnson said:

... the clock is ticking to the furious rhythm of hundreds of billions of pistons and turbines and furnaces and engines with which we are pumping carbon into the air ... quilting the earth in an invisible and suffocating blanket of CO2 raising the temperature of the planet with a speed and an abruptness that is entirely manmade ... 2 degrees more and we jeopardise the food supply for hundreds of millions of people as crops wither, locusts swarm; 3 degrees and you can add more wildfires and cyclones—twice as many of them, five times as many droughts and 36 times as many heatwaves; 4 degrees and we say goodbye to whole cities—Miami, Alexandria, Shanghai—all lost beneath the waves ... It's one minute to midnight on that doomsday clock and we need to act now. If we don't get serious about climate change today, it will be too late for our children to do so tomorrow.

With all this talk about disasters, ruin, and impending catastrophe, you could be forgiven for feeling in an apocalyptic frame of mind—despair for the future, fear of catastrophe, dwelling on the end of the world. It feels like all our systems and structures are coming apart at the seams.

Certainly there are elements of the apocalyptic frame of mind in today's gospel reading. Mark 13 is not called the 'The Little Apocalypse' for nothing. Central to apocalyptic thinking is that God controls history, that the world has become so evil that only God can save it, and that God will rescue the world from evil at the time of God's own choosing, establishing a new creation in which righteousness will characterise everyone in it. There are similar passages in *Daniel 7–12* and *Revelation* where the future is described in violent terms—with the skies darkening, buildings toppling, nations warring, famines, the earth shaking, the moon failing to shine and stars falling from the sky.

In our Gospel lesson Jesus is in an apocalyptic frame of mind: he is fed up with the religious leaders (Mark 11–12). He curses an unproductive fig tree, a symbol of Israel's religious system (11:12–14), 20–25). He cleanses the temple (11:15–19). In the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (12:1–12), he prophesies that the vineyard will be taken away from Israel and given to others. His teaching about the widow's offering exposes the well-to-do, most of whom are the religious elite (12:41–44). He denounces the scribes (12:38–40). Mark 11–12 adds up to one thing: the religious system is corrupt to the core. Then next in our Gospel lesson Jesus prophesies the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem (13:2) and warns of cataclysmic events to follow.

The temple complex in Jerusalem was one of the most majestic and beautiful buildings in the entire world. It took 50 years to build. It was located on top of a mountain. It was huge, 185 metres long, 45 metres wide, and reaching the height of a 15 story building. The eastern side of the temple was plated with gold and the ten gates into the temple were plated in gold or silver. It must have been a stunning sight, one of the wonders of the world. Even more significantly for the Jewish people, it was the place where God dwelt.

The disciples were obviously impressed and overawed at the sight of the temple. 'Look Teacher! What large stones! What large buildings!' (v. 1). What Jesus said next almost amounted to sacrilege. 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. (v. 2).

What a thing to say! How could this magnificent house of God be destroyed? It was completely unthinkable.

If that wasn't bad enough, Jesus goes on to talk about the end of all things. He warns the disciples:

When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. (vs 7–8).

I said earlier that Jesus in today's gospel reading is in an apocalyptic frame of mind. He warns of scary things about to happen. The temple will be destroyed (which it was by the Romans forty years later in 70 A.D.) and there will be earthquakes, famines, hurricanes, wildfires, and war. But an apocalyptic frame of mind means more than making scary predictions about the end of the world. The word 'apocalypse' comes from Greek word that

means to *uncover*, or *reveal*. Yes, scary things will happen, yet these are but the 'birth pangs'. Something new is being born. This is what is called the 'apocalyptic good news'. The birth pangs are not the end; they are the beginning of the end, the signs that point us to the hope (and joy) that Christ offers.

Unlike the media which often dwell on catastrophe and mingles shock and horror with excitement and voyeuristic satisfaction in violence and public disasters, Jesus points us to a way of life that is free from apocalyptic anxiety and fear to one of hope and faith and love. It is all too easy to become depressed by the cataclysmic events happening in the world, but Jesus urges us to remain patient, and hopeful.

Let me try to present this apocalyptic good news in personal and more concrete terms: Jesus says that when things fall apart, it is not the end 'but the beginning of birth pangs' (v. 8). Think of when a woman anticipates birth both fearfully and joyfully—fearing pain but looking forward to the baby. After the birth, painful memories dissipate, and the new mother is left with joy.

As Mark wrote his Gospel, the Church was in the midst of birth pangs: persecution, false messiahs, Christians being led astray. In the midst of this, Mark reports, 'These things are the beginning of birth pains.' It is terrible! It is painful! But there is hope ahead!

We need to remember this in the midst of our own troubles. There are, indeed, wars and threats of war, famines, pandemics, failed states and endless reasons for despair. That's our reality. However, Jesus says, 'These things are the beginning of birth pangs.' In our personal lives, too, we will face crises—loved ones die, institutions fail, dreams are shattered, there are disappointments, failed relationships, frailty, grim diagnoses, dying and death. Jesus says, 'These things are the beginning of birth pains.' They are not the end. There is hope. There is joy ahead! When things fall apart for you, be especially attentive to the presence of God. This is where we meet Jesus. This is how our hearts stay prepared for his coming.

HYMN: 'God of grace and God of Glory' (TIS 611)

1. God of grace and God of glory,
on your people pour your power;
now fulfil your Church's story,
bring the bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour.

2. See the host of evil round us
scorn your Christ, assail his ways.
Fears and doubts too long have bound us;
free our hearts to work and praise.
Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage,
for the living of these days.

3. Cure your children's warring madness;
bend our pride to your control;
shame our wanton selfish gladness,
rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage,
lest we miss your kingdom's goal.

4. Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the gift of your salvation
be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage,
serving you whom we adore.

Harry Emerson Fosdick
Public Domain

OFFERING AND OFFERING PRAYER**NOTICES****HYMN: 'At the name of Jesus' (TIS 231)**

1. At the name of Jesus
every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him
King of Glory now;
this the Father's pleasure
that we call him Lord,
who from the beginning
was the mighty Word.

2. Humbled for a season
to receive a name
from the lips of sinners
unto whom he came,
faithfully he bore it
spotless to the last,
brought it back victorious
when from death he passed.

3. In your hearts enthrone him,
there let him make new
all that is not holy,
all that is not true.
He is God the Saviour,
he is Christ the Lord,
ever to be worshipped,
trusted and adored.

4. When this same Lord Jesus
shall appear again
in his Father's glory,
there with him to reign,
then may we adore him,
all before him bow,
as our hearts confess him
King of Glory now.

Caroline Maria Noel
Public Domain

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE (Mel Macarthur)

Loving God

As we are progressively seeing restrictions from the pandemic being dropped and we are gaining more agency over our lives, we think of those people who have suffered most from the lockdowns. We think of the people who have been forced to close businesses and not been able to reopen: people who have lost livelihoods, savings, hopes and dreams. We pray for a just recompense for those people, who have borne the worst of the restrictions. We pray for the artists and creative people in the community, who were not provided with assistance from Job Keeper schemes. These are the people whose talents and skills enrich a society, and yet the appreciation for these talented and creative people was not forthcoming when the restrictions hit hardest. We pray that those in authority may take the time to reflect on the importance of the arts in a society which can shift us away from being simply a dull, materialistic culture; a Philistine society. We pray the artists, the painters, the writers, the dramatists, all the creative people find assistance forthcoming so that they can recover from the privations of the pandemic and continue to provide the enriching experiences that a society needs to thrive.

Lord in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.

We pray for the natural environment, your Creation, which seems to be continually under threat from materialists and Philistines, who simply see it as a cash cow and who seek ever new ways to exploit and degrade it. We give thanks for people who see our landscapes for their beauty and place aesthetics above profits. In particular we give thanks for the people who saw our Blue Mountains as a potential World Heritage site, rather than as a shale mine. We thank you that they had the courage and tenacity to advocate for their ideas and convictions. May we continue their tradition and do all we can to preserve this place for current and future generations and may they build from their experiences an appreciation of beauty and grandeur that will enrich their lives.

Lord in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.

As we remember our beautiful environment here in the Blue Mountains, we remember, only too well that this was never ceded land. We remember the First Nations people, the traditional owners of this land, and we pray that we will find ways of reconciliation with these people and that we will strive to make some significant and meaningful reparations for colonial and other wrongs and buses wrought on these people.

Lord in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.



We pray for those countries where struggle for survival is all they know. For the people of Yemen and the people of Somalia, and others in numerous other countries where war has brought death and destruction on a daily basis, and where scarcity of basic supplies is ever threatening to bring even more famine and disease. We pray that diplomatic solutions may be tried as a way of bringing solutions, we see little evidence of this happening.

Lord in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.

Lord, in so many areas of life we are dependent upon media reporting to make us aware of what is happening in our world and to help us determine our responses. So often this reporting has flaws in it a mile wide. When we view the reporting critically, too much of it is highly contestable and often highly biased. We pray for an honesty in reporting; that reporters will state their political and ideological positions, so that we do not have to trawl through to find out for ourselves, so that we do not have to begin to view reports from a position of suspicion from the very the outset. We would like to hear or view reports that will not require us to have suspicion as our default position from the very outset.

Lord in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.

Lord we pray for our church here in Leura. We pray for our mission in our area. We ask that we may look to find new ways of bringing the message of Christ, the message of hope, the message of the Great Commission to others, particularly as we now lead up to the season of Advent.

Lord in you mercy:

Hear our prayer.

We conclude with the Lord's Prayer.

Our father in Heaven, hallowed be your name.
 Your Kingdom come, you will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread,
 and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
 Save us from the Time of Trial, and deliver us from evil.
 For the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
 Now and forever.
 Amen

The Sending Forth of the People of God

HYMN: 'Lord of all hopefulness' (TIS 613)

1.Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
 whose trust, ever childlike, no cares could destroy,
 be there at our waking and give us, we pray,
 your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.

2.Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
 whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,
 be there at our labours and give us, we pray,
 your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.

3.Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,
 your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,
 be there at our homing and give us, we pray,
 your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.

4.Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
 whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,
 be there at our keeping and give us, we pray,
 your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.

Joyce Placzek
 Public Domain

BLESSING

The blessing of God almighty,
 the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
 be upon you and remain with you always.

Amen.

DISMISSAL

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Acknowledgements

Music: Margaret Neville