**Be prepared!**

**Mark 13 v 1-8**

**Daniel 12 v 1-3**

If you’re anything like me, you will be looking ahead at the moment, and starting to think about Christmas. Being in my line of work, of course, means there is alot of planning for church services, as well as planning for family and present buying and so on. And the hope behind the planning is that it will all go well, and be a cause of celebration and happiness where we can celebrate the birth of Christ. So no matter how stressful it gets, and it does get stressful! I look forward to a time of great joy celebrating Jesus’ birth.

But how different is the vision of future that Jesus gives.

This is hardly a reading that you would choose to cheer yourself up, is it?!!! It begins with the disciples open admiration of the buildings they are surrounded by, including the temple. Built by Herod to appease the Jewish people, the Temple was reputed to be the most beautiful building in the whole world. To the disciples it is magnificent, with huge stones and decoration. But Jesus sees another dimension. He foretells of the destruction of the building, something which did come true in AD70. He predicts wars, earthquakes and famine. He talks about deceit. And this prediction is also reflected in the reading from Daniel, ‘There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then.’(Dan 12 v 1)

Just last week we celebrated Armistice and the 100 year centenary of the end of the first world war. So as well as remembering those who fell, it was also a day when we celebrate peace. Yet in reality we are not living in peace. Wars are still ongoing. The victims of war, with physical and mental injuries; and their loved ones, are fighting internal wars of their own.

And then there seems, to me, to be an increase in extreme weather patterns and natural disasters-floods, earthquakes, tsunamis. And millions die of hunger due to famine. People in this country are struggling with poverty with increased numbers of people struggling to make ends meet.

So when I read this reading I wondered, is this happening now? I’ve noticed that people have started Christmas preparations earlier this year-there were Christmas films on television before Bonfire night. And I wonder whether it’s partly a reaction to the hard times people are facing. Whether its because people want, almost need, a happy thought in all the struggle.

Jesus describes these disasters as the beginning of birth pains, and I found that really helpful. I suppose if you haven’t had them you might not find it so helpful, but just try to imagine! But it reminded me that Jesus had brothers and, I believe, a sister. So he would have been present when his mother gave birth.

And she would have had her children with no National Health Service, or gas and air, or any of those privileges-as indeed, many women world wide now don’t have them. So Jesus would have had some experience, although not first hand, of the perils of child birth.

As would his disciples. In the ordinary world of the ancient Middle East a good deal of intimate family life went on in the semi public world, and giving birth was part of common knowledge. And Jesus chooses to describe these disasters as the beginning of birth-pains.

I don’t remember the beginning of birth pains, because I had my daughter following a three day labour.

It took that long that they gave my husband a bed on the ward! When the cleaner came in the next day she had the shock of her life. The first male birth!!!

So I don’t remember the beginning of birth pains, but I do remember knowing this was a process I was going to have to go through. Babies don’t get beamed down from outer space. Very inconvenient of them! But you have to go through it. And I remember, at the beginning, dreading it, and feeling really scared. And I think, as we hear this reading, we can feel the same. Will it get worse? What will happen to us?

But I know, from giving birth, that you do cope with it! Its like waves on a sea, you have lulls, that enable you to strengthen and cope with the next one. You manage it. In fact, you manage it so well that some people go through it again and produce brothers and sisters!

But there’s no doubt that it’s a big and difficult journey and a significant event. And Jesus is warning his disciples that tough times are ahead.

But Jesus says do not be alarmed. ‘Such things must happen, but the end is still to come,’ he says. And the end here, I think, is not the end of the world, something to be dreaded- but a beginning. The end is the end of all the former things he has described. There will be, as Daniel puts it, deliverance. ‘Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake.’

Daniel is speaking here of an age to come, in which justice and peace, mercy and truth would flourish. Some will awake ‘to shame and everlasting contempt.’ But then he gives a beautiful description of those who are wise and discerning. ‘(They) will shine like the brightness of the heavens.’

Jesus is warning us, in this passage, so that we can be wise and discerning. If we use our heads and refuse to get swept into the ways of the world; if we uphold our faith and strive to lead a good life, despite the evils around us, we can shine, no matter how dark it becomes.

And then, Daniel says ’those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars, for ever and ever.’ So if we share our faith with others, however we do it-whether it be talking to them of it or by inviting them to the Christmas fair or the crib service-or if we show them an alternative way of living by leading a good life and sharing the things we have, we will shine like the stars, for ever and ever. A beautiful image.

And to come back to the child birth reference. You take that first look at your child, when they’re born, and the labour pangs become the past. Your focus changes. You are in a different zone, in a different life. And the love just overwhelms you. But when I gave birth I was also completely overwhelmed by the miracle of birth. How this tiny thing has occurred at all.

Birth pains are not the end of something. They are the beginning. The beginning of a new life. Of creation.

So, what do we do? Well, Jesus is warning us that this will happen, and we don’t know when. It may have begun already. But we can’t dictate when it will happen or how. I remember when I was pregnant, there were friends who said you could encourage a baby to be born by eating a hot, spicy meal. But if the baby does not want to be born, no amount of Tikka Massala will do it! It could happen anytime. So be prepared.

And listen and look out. We have already been sent those wonderful people who teach us God’s ways-it may be your parents, it may be Sunday school teachers, it may be friends, it may be others in church. So discern those around you and those who lead you in good ways of living; listen to them. And those who don’t, those who try to lead you into thinking that isn’t of God, don’t listen. Don’t be swept into their rhetoric.

And do not worry. As we look forward to the birth of Jesus, remember that His birth changed everything. He gave us hope beyond struggle. This is not the end. Like birth pangs it’s the beginning-the beginning of new life, everlasting life. And with God on our side, ultimately, we have nothing to fear. Amen.