

## And Immediately: Cathedral, Advent 1, 3/12/2017

I know I've got a bit of a cheek addressing you this morning when I'm a signed-up member of Manana International whose motto is "Procrastinators Unite – Tomorrow!" Some of you may know that paid-up procrastinators get hooked on the adrenalin rush that comes from last-minute work and the satisfaction of turning up smiling and serene with tasks done, despite whatever turmoil is on your desk or in your stomach.

I once saw a t-shirt that I really wanted. It said "I put the PRO into Procrastinate." Unfortunately I never got around to sourcing one. If the very notion is leaving some of you feeling anxious, I'm very much aware that there's precious little room for the P-word in life currently. So I did sign up for a Procrastination Workshop, but unfortunately it was postponed.

We're starting a new Liturgical year in the Gospel of Mark, so a couple of reminders about that interesting book. Firstly it is almost universally agreed that Mark was the first gospel written and Matthew and Luke both used it very extensively as the framework for their own gospels, often word-for-word.

If we were to imagine ourselves the readers of this Gospel before the others were available our understanding of the story would be very different from the privileged perspective we have 2000 years later. First of all we would know nothing of Jesus' birth and infancy, because Mark's beginning is the emergence of John the Baptist. Secondly the Gospel ends with news of the resurrection which sends three women fleeing from the tomb in fear, saying nothing to anyone. Is Mark saying to his audience "Well it's up to you now to share the news of Christ's resurrection"? While we will shortly be immersed in Matthew and Luke's very different stories of Jesus' birth, it is useful to retain the perspective of Mark who has either no access to infancy narratives or no curiosity about the context Jesus emerged from.

And you'll know too that Mark's Gospel is written in very rough Greek and constantly does that thing your English teacher told you not to do, which is to start your sentences with And, which I just did. In fact Mark's favourite phrase is "and immediately" which is softened somewhat in modern translations, but is plainly evident in the King James Version. You'd think that if God wrote Mark, then God would've had better grammar. But Mark is a very earthy no-time-to-waste Gospel of urgency and immediacy.

It was probably written in light of the Jewish revolt against the Romans which began in 66AD and was finally crushed with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70. In the Gospels the temple's destruction reads like a foretelling but actually the Gospels were written subsequent to these cataclysmic events.

The apocalyptic language we hear in today's Gospel reading might at first seem alien to us, but the writer emphasizes the need to stay awake, to be attentive and aware. To paraphrase, he says "Once the labour pains start, there's no way to prevent the arrival of the baby." *For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.*

"And immediately" might need to claim more of our attention.

We learned this week more about the faultline we live on and the prospect of a quake up to an unimaginable 9. Will I get some more baked beans for the emergency kit or shall I do it later?

We learned that with a focus on eradicating violence against women that in Fiji almost two-thirds of women experience relationship violence. They need change immediately and their churches are addressing it.

We learned that North Korea will probably be able to aim a nuclear warhead at Washington D.C. in 2018. If nation rises against nation then they are 12667 kilometers apart, which suddenly makes our planet very small. Pardon my ghoulish Googling, but out of interest I found that it is only a little over 10000 km from Pyong Yang to Auckland. And immediately the NZ government began to mind its language towards Kim Jong Un (he predicted).

However, it was listening to our Pasefika Archbishop Winston Halapua at the last General Synod that really made me sit up and take notice. He said this:

*"Rising water and waves - to me this is a fundamental challenge to speak out and to spur people to action. The real stories of the threat of climate change to the peoples of Tuvalu, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea and of Tonga, ... have brought home to me the extent of the crises and the growing awareness that some islands in the Pacific Ocean face extinction. Oceania, our ancestral home and identity, faces unprecedented threats to the wellbeing of its people*

*and to its environment. Because of this, a deep sense of call has emerged within me. ... The vulnerability to human life and to the environment caused by the rising sea levels resulting from the new phenomenon of climate change impacts not only on Oceania but on the whole planet earth”.*

Already contamination by salt is ruining crops for the 10500 inhabitants. Some of the smallest islands have already disappeared. The tiny nation may be non-existent by the end of this century.

And immediately all the peoples of Pacific nations cried out to Australia, the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases per capita, and to the USA, largest overall emitter *Do you not care that we are drowning?*

Nation shall fall against nation.

New Zealand provides for a small number of migrants from Tuvalu annually.

Being in the business of funerals, I have lately been adding a prayer for our awareness of our own mortality and the gift of each new day. Maybe that's because my own father died suddenly aged 61 – younger than I am now, or maybe it's just the creaking in my own bones. But most of us probably prefer to forget the *and immediately* that whisks away some of our loved ones.

Advent is traditionally a season of self-examination and preparation.

Regardless of your own theological convictions about the return of Christ there is the reality that should we immediately and momentarily fall off our perch and join the choir invisible, history, at least, will judge the kind of person we have been, and the degree to which we have been blind to our faults. We sang a hymn recently – *Your love O God is broad like beach and meadow* – which contains the memorable verse “*But there are walls that keep us all divided; we fence each other in with hate and war. Fear is the bricks and mortar of our prison, our pride of self the prison coat we wear.*”

The walls which keep us all divided seem very brittle and uncertain in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

*Therefore keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come.*

*Note to self: get a t-shirt that says "Seize the day", should you get around to it.*

- Ian Render