

MARK 13:1-8
HOLDING ON...

Is the world falling apart? Here are some simple words; how do they make you feel? Trump. Brexit. Syria. Atheism. We sit and watch; we watch the world as it develops, some situations in the political sphere and we wonder about things, about attitudes, about choices – where will it all end up? We sit and watch our society as it changes and develops, and we wonder about things – we hear stories of so many young people killed in London this year and we wonder – where will it all end up? We sit and watch the way people view the church, or regard faith-based issues, religion (I suppose) and we see people turn away from the Christian faith and we hear others be critical of the churches; Christian values are replaced by a different set or by no values at all and we wonder – where will it all end up? The picture on the screen – it is beautiful or is it messy? There is no right answer to that, but we will see it differently; where do we find beauty in our world, in our society today? Where do you see messiness?



Have you heard the phrase “the snowflake generation”? It was added to the dictionary in 2016 as a new phrase in the language. The “snowflake generation” is defined as “the generation of people who became adults in the 2010s, viewed as being less resilient and more prone to taking offence than previous generations”. I suppose “snowflakes” because they don’t last very long when it gets warmer. These are people who find it hard to cope with difficult things; who can’t cope easily when their world falls apart; who don’t like the messiness of the world because they come across views other than their own and are more prone to take offence when their views are challenged. I’m not too bothered about the phrase, but I do have a question about our resilience (another in-word) in our world. How do we hold on to faith? How do we hold on to Christian values? How do we hold on to what is important in a world that feels as if it is falling apart?

Jesus looks out on a world that will fall apart. That’s part of His view of the city of Jerusalem when He looks out on the city with His disciples. Mark 13 is described by some as “The Little Apocalypse”, words and ideas that will reveal important things to come and will be filled out later especially in the book of Revelation as God inspires John to see what will come one day, ultimately to see a new heaven and a new earth that Jesus will create when He comes again. But that’s not where the conversation starts. It starts with the magnificent buildings of Jerusalem, especially the temple. The conversation then goes on from the temple to the world around the temple and what will happen in the days to come; it goes on past our reading to suggest a solution, to suggest resilience for the disciples and the followers of Jesus, so that we hold on to the faith even in the days when the world is a dark place.

The temple was magnificent. Work began on it in 19BC and so more than 40 years later when Jesus visits, it is still not finished; it was finally completed in AD63, a whole 80 years it took to complete. Huge stones made its foundations; there was beautiful work by hundreds of craftsmen to make it a spectacular place. It was built for the glory of God and to remind people of God’s greatness; Jesus spoke of it as His Father’s house; there was a zeal for the temple in His heart. But it would be destroyed in AD70, only 7 years after it was completed. Jesus saw this would happen, so He says “Do you...” (Mark 13:2) The disciples, Jews, brought up to see this place as symbolizing the presence of God amongst His people, found it hard to imagine it gone! The West wall is still there, and is still a Jewish place of prayer.

What did Jesus see? 4 things:

- “*One greater...*” (*Matthew 12:6*) Jesus is speaking of Himself. The old order was being superseded, all that the temple stood for, with its offerings and sacrifices, was being done away with after Jesus.
- The temple was a stumbling-block – people thought they could do as they please, even in the temple, and think that because they had the temple they were secure.
- It was a stumbling-block even to the disciples – they were too much impressed with its grandeur, and not so quick to see Jesus as King!
- Did Jesus also see something of the rumbling political mood? Jews were rebelling against Rome, troubling the occupying army by their rebellion; did Jesus see that sooner or later the Jews would bring down on themselves the wrath of the Roman army that would destroy the temple?

Perhaps Jesus saw all of these and the temple is destroyed and Jerusalem is in a mess; its centre-piece is gone, destroyed; the world is falling apart!

Jesus sees the world fall apart in other ways. “*Watch out...*” (*Mark 13:5-8*) There are all kinds of experiences in the world that cause us trouble. There are charlatans who cry out for our attention, people who want us to trust them, or follow them, but their cause is in an empty blind alley. War – we know well-enough what that means and the damage that war causes, either in World War One, or in Syria today. There are earthquakes, famines, other things we call natural disasters because they are part of our world, rather than something we do to each other. All of these experiences (and others) leave us feeling that the world is falling apart and that God has gone away and left us.

Jesus has a different view. He says two things: first of all, these things happen, indeed He says they must happen; they are part and parcel of life; we should not get unduly alarmed by them because God has not gone away; God is still there and still at work. He can say that because secondly, He says that the “*End is... these are...*” (*Mark 13:7f*) Every mother knows about birth-pains, the moments when it becomes obvious that the baby is not far from being born, the agonies through which you must go in order for a new life to come into the world and have the joy of a child! For Jesus, these world-falling-apart kind of experiences are the beginning of the birth-pains of a new world. God will create a new heaven and a new earth; everything evil, bad, or wrong, everything that causes pain and suffering will be done away with; the new world will be perfect peace and light in the undiluted presence of God. These troubled things are the beginning of birth-pains.

“*He who...*” (*Mark 13:13*) it is the easiest thing in the world for us to throw away faith when life in the world is hard! For lots of men in the First World War their experience of war meant the “end of God” and faith was abandoned, and they blamed God as if it was all His fault. The easiest thing is to walk away from trusting God when life is hard, we lose our way and turn in on ourselves and faith in the God who loves us is just not necessary, we think! Sometimes God is to blame, we think. But for Jesus, telling His friends that the world will fall apart is all about helping them to sustain their faith and to continue to obey God. This is all about helping them to stand firm, equipping them to be resilient in the face of a troubled world. We watch the world and we see all the things that we see – what shall we do? Do we decide that God has gone away and that Christian faith is useless from now onwards? Or do we see, through the eyes of faith and hope, that God is still there, that Jesus is still Lord, that God’s love is still new every day and that we still live by faith?

Hebrews 10 is the salad-bar of the New Testament, full of “let-uses”! There are four of them that help us understand what it means to stand firm.

1. “*let us...*” (*Hebrews 10:22*) keep the faith; God has done great things for us, all of which still stand, all of which are to save us; let us keep faith with the God who has not gone away, but who is always with us and who knows what we face and who loves us endlessly.

2. *"let us..." (Hebrews 10:23)* Hope is about something we don't yet have. Christian hope focusses on the promises that God has made to us, the promise of heaven, the promise that Jesus will come again, the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, a certain hope because God is faithful, God keeps His promises. Some were giving up on that hope because life was hard and their world was falling apart. Hebrews encourages us to hold on to hope because God keeps His promises.
3. *"let us..." (Hebrews 10:24)* Help each other! Support each other. It is better together and there is strength that we can give and gain with other Christians. We can care for each other, give each other courage, love each other and so make it easier for others to stand firm in faith.
4. *"let us..." (Hebrews 10:25)* Keep meeting together. I have noticed that one thing we tend to do when life is hard is withdraw: we stop coming to church, we stop going to other things, we stay inside! We are on our own. Hebrews is wise when the preacher says "keep meeting!" The fourth part of being able to stand firm is that we keep meeting together, praying together and so on, so we help one another to stand firm.

How do you feel when watch the world and see it seem to fall apart? We feel more than think! The heart rules the head! Do we feel afraid? Do we feel as if we are left to fight these battles on our own? Do we feel helpless? We feel more than think in days like these; our emotions take over and reason flies out of window. So how do we hold onto faith when the world seems to be falling apart, either the big world out there, or our own little version of the world in here. How do we hold on to faith?

We consider; considering is important alongside feeling! We feel afraid and we consider that God loves us with a love that is new every day! We feel alone, and we consider God's promise to be with us always. We feel as if the old certainties are falling part and we consider that God keeps His promises. We feel as if there is nothing left, and we consider the hope of heaven, a new heaven and a new earth. We consider, and God helps us to hold on to faith, hope and love. These are Jesus' ways in our world; it has always shown signs of falling apart; these are the birth-pains of a new world. Consider, hold on to that hope and trust Jesus.