

Mark 13:1-13

Magnificence Lost

God's love never passes away

St. Andrew's, our big beautiful gothic styled church across from City Hall, built from large blocks of sandstone from a now closed quarry at Simpson Island. Let me share just a little passage straight out of our written history,

The first drafts for the structure called for a brick church, but after laying the foundation, Braden (the contractor), the building committee and the architects held a conference to discuss an alternate plan. For an additional four thousand dollars, the entire structure could be made from Simpson Islet grey/white sandstone. Fortunately, the members of the congregation willingly agreed to the supplementary cost. The resulting edifice was declared "magnificent," "the most imposing...in the city," which has "attracted much complimentary notice."

Of special interest is the main entrance facing Brodie Street. It is composed of two Gothic arches with elaborate moulds and is supported at the centre and on either side by ten massive, polished granite columns. The ornamental cap of Bedford stone is beautifully carved, the design at the centre being the Maple Leaf, while the one on the right is carved into a Rose and on the left, the Scottish Thistle. The label mould around the arches stops with two bosses, carved with Shamrocks in bold relief, while on the right arch final is carved the Leek, representing Wales and on the left final are the Lilies of France. All these carvings are symbolic of the fact that everyone is welcome to the church.

The main tower of the north-east corner is also architecturally significant. It rises to a height of ninety-five feet and is supported by four angle buttresses. Square to the clock loft, it changes into an octagon and terminates in the well known typical Gothic weathering of this period of architecture.¹

"magnificent," "the most imposing...in the city" words of hope, promise, and expectation. It would take a lot for this building to come down. There have been many people over just the last five years that I have been here who have commented on the magnificence of the structure. Just this past September we had over hundred and forty people come to look at a building that they consider special in this city. It seems nearly impossible to think of this place as gone, torn down, becoming rubble.

¹ <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca/about/the-st-andrews-story>.

Now compare this to the magnificence of the Temple in Jerusalem in Jesus time. The Temple that Herod the Great commissioned was also built from quarried stone. It was considered his most significant and largest project. "Some of [the stones] weighed well over 100 tons, the largest measuring 44.6 feet by 11 feet by 16.5 feet and weighing approximately 567 to 628 tons, while most were in the range of 2.5 by 3.5 by 15 feet (approximately 28 tons)."² No one could imagine that magnificent edifice ever being destroyed.

Yet, on that particular day in Jerusalem, as Jesus and his companions leave the temple, "one of the disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (v1) The comment comes on the heels of a teaching about the seemingly insignificant offering of a widow, but how it meant more because it came out of her poverty while others gave from their abundance. They had barely walked out the door after finishing the conversation and instead of looking for the little things of great meaning that others ignore the disciple is immediately awed by the awesomeness of the building.

While we may have said something to the effect of "yes, this is amazing, look what people are capable of creating", Jesus responds in an unlikely manner saying, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down" (v2).

It is believed that the gospel of Mark was written somewhere in the time when there was imminent threat of this happening, was happening, or had just happened. So when the readers of this Gospel first heard these words it was well after Jesus death and they were facing persecution. And all these stones did come down. In the year 70 of the Common Era, approximately forty years after Jesus death the temple did come down in the time of the Roman Empire and Jerusalem was destroyed in retaliation of an ongoing Jewish revolt.

The loss of the Temple would be devastating to the religious of the day. It was the focal point of their faith. Pilgrimages were made to make sacrifices in the Temple. It was believed that God dwelt in that place.

Imagine for a moment how we would feel about St. Andrew's being destroyed. For many, faith is very much intertwined with having been raised in this church, the familiarity of the place, the memories, the experiences. What would it do to your faith if you could no longer worship here? As much as our faith can be bound up in our buildings, the Jewish people were as much or more bound up in the understanding of the Temple as the focus of their faith. It identified them. To see it destroyed would mean a huge rupture in their experience of God and of their worship, just as it would for many of us.

When faced with Jesus' words, the disciples at the time are focused on the when and what of Jesus prediction. "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (v4). Jesus gives them all kinds of signs to look

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Temple. Accessed November 17, 2018.

for, describing the many persecutions and terrible things that will also come to pass in time.

This particular scripture from Mark 13 is only a short part of a longer discourse the purpose of which is to point us to Jesus and the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus himself says that all of “this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” And this is also the crux of this passage. The intention of birthing is to give new life. In Jesus we are to find new life. In our faith we come to know the permanence of God’s love for us. Buildings, temples, churches, or otherwise are not permanent. One only need do a google search for the use of churches that have been sold to know that the church as a house of worship, no matter how magnificent, is only temporary.

St. Andrew’s as we know it will not always be here, but God’s love for us is never ending. Jesus sacrifice, that seemed so insignificant at the time of his death, has had a lasting impact on the world. It birthed a new way of relating to the world, to each other, to ourselves, and God.

Henri Nouwen, a wise and revered Catholic priest and theologian, told this wisdom story in his book, *Our Greatest Gift*.

Twins are talking to each other in the womb. The sister said to the brother, *“I believe there is life after birth.”* Her brother protested vehemently, *“No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling to the cord that feeds us.”* The little girl insisted, *“There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move.”* Still she could not convince her twin brother.

After some silence, the sister said hesitantly, *“I have something else to say, and I’m afraid you won’t believe that, either, but I think there is a mother.”* Her brother became furious. *“A mother!”* he shouted. *“What are you talking about?”* *I have never seen a mother, and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? As I told you, this place is all we have. Why do you always want more?. This is not such a bad place, after all. We have all we need, so let’s be content.”*

The sister was quite overwhelmed by her brother’s response and for a while didn’t dare say anything more. But she couldn’t let go of her thoughts, and since she only had her twin brother to speak to, she finally said, *“Don’t you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They’re quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful.”* *“Yes,”* he answered. *“What’s special about that?”* *“Well,”* the sister said, *“I think that these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face-to-face. Don’t you think that’s exciting”*

What we face in our lives the edifices that seem to be unbreakable, the challenges whether cancer, abuse, loss, death, grief, addiction, are part of life. They are like birth pangs. We can’t seem to imagine being on the other side of that struggle. When we see

hear of more wars, more refugees, more politicians talking smack, we need to remember that this is part of living, but it is not to be our focus. Not once did Jesus promise that life would be easy if you believed. In fact, the scripture read today is all about the hardships we will face, but what becomes more and more evident as the Gospel of Mark unfolds, is that Jesus promises that there is a better future.

That future comes now when we place our focus on God's love and hope in the present moment and even more fully in our death. Life is just the prelude to the fullness we will experience when we are fully with God, but it does not preclude experiencing God's love right now.

Life is not easy, but if we focus only on what is before us today, the magnificent and the struggle, we miss out on the significance of what Jesus has done to bring us into right relationship with God and one another. Everything we experience in life will pass. Many use the phrase, "this too shall pass" to share the fleetingness of our experiences. What never passes, what is always permanent, is God's love. Let it make an indelible mark on your heart, know that you are loved, that whatever you face you are not alone and this is just the beginning of the birth pangs you may face. In all of it, may the peace of Christ be with you as one who endures to the end. Amen.