

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

We have been overwhelmed this week by the images of the bushfires in New South Wales, Queensland and around Port Lincoln. We know that there are bushfires somewhere in Australia each summer. But the early onset of these fires and the intensity with which they have been burning has been quite frightening. We could say that those who have been measuring the change in our climate have been predicting such fires. But we all find it hard to accept the predictions of things that we do not want to happen.

Jesus made a prediction about something that the people of Israel did not want to happen, and thought would never happen. He predicted the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and its temple more than thirty years before it happened.

We read about that in today's gospel. When people were admiring the beauty of the Jerusalem temple that had only recently been rebuilt by Herod, Jesus predicted, "All these things that you are admiring now – the time will come when not a single stone will be left on another: everything will be destroyed." This seemed unbelievable. The temple was at the very heart of the life and religion of the people of Israel. For the faithful Jew it was the sign that God dwells among his people.

Jesus was asked when this was going to happen, and for the signs that would indicate that it was about to take place. For many who heard Jesus' words, if the temple could be destroyed then that would signal the end of the world.

By the time the Christian communities had read Luke's Gospel and his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans in response to the uprising of the Jewish people. Christians recognised in that the fulfilment of what Jesus the prophet had said. It gave great weight to the other things that Jesus had said. Now they had to listen carefully to what else Jesus had predicted.

He told them not to be frightened when they heard of wars and revolutions. They were to expect that there would be great earthquakes and plagues and famines here and there. But he said that this is not the end.

Perhaps the thing that they needed to know most was that they, like Jesus himself, would have to expect persecution because of their faith. The ways that Luke describes these persecutions in the gospel were even able to be seen fulfilled in his second book, the Acts of the Apostles. But in this time of persecution the followers of Jesus would not be abandoned. Like the first martyr Stephen, they "would be given an eloquence and a

wisdom that none of their opponents would be able to resist or contradict.” Just as Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest friends, the band he called his family, so his followers would be betrayed by members of their families. Some would be put to death. But even if the followers of Jesus had to suffer martyrdom their human death would not be a sign that God had abandoned them. “Not a hair of your head will be lost. Your endurance will win you your lives.”

What comfort can we take from all of that? Are we able to listen to what Jesus says to us with the attention that we might give a prophet? Do we look to Him as the one who can help us to make some sense of a world that is so confusing and challenging to us at times?

Perhaps this gospel can help us to understand that to be a follower of Jesus is to put ourselves in the firing line of much criticism and ridicule. We Christians are often criticised because we are different. We do not hold the same set of values that many others in our society seem to hold. We have different priorities. At times it is not so much the criticism that hurts but that we are made to feel that what we think about things and the values that we have do not matter. We are made to feel irrelevant.

What comes through so strongly in our gospel today is that we are called to be witnesses of the risen Lord. The

way that we live, not matter how others may treat us, is meant to speak of the God of love living within us.

All Christians, no matter what community they belong to, are called to be witnesses for Christ. This week Pope Francis met with some members of the Salvation Army. He recalled that his first contact with this group was when he was four years old. It was the first lesson he ever received in ecumenism. “Their example of humble service to the least of our brothers and sisters spoke louder than any words,” he said. “The holiness that shows itself in concrete acts of goodness, solidarity, and healing speaks to the heart and testifies to the authenticity of our discipleship.” Pope Francis said gratuitous love shown to others in acts of service both attracts and convinces. Young people need that type of Christian witness, since they often lack positive examples in daily life. “In a world where selfishness and divisions abound, the noble fragrance of genuine self-giving love can offer a much-needed antidote, and open minds and hearts to the transcendent meaning of our existence,” he said.

We look to the future with hope, praying that we can be become clear witnesses of the Lord who calls us to be his disciples. Whatever lies ahead we can be confident that the Lord will be there with us, reshaping us into the people that he calls us to be.