

It is easy to take today's gospel reading as one in which Jesus talks about the end of the world. Indeed, because it stops where it does, this may well be what the compilers of the Sunday lectionary want us to think. Why would they want this? The four Sundays before Advent are those in which we are expected to concentrate on eschatology (an obscure and unhelpful piece of church jargon which means the End Time – the four Last Things, which are death, judgement, heaven and hell). But as the first two Sundays of this period are usually devoted to All Saints/All Souls and Remembrance, and the fourth one (next week) is the celebration of Christ the King, eschatology tends to get squeezed into the remaining Sunday, which is today. It's quite a squeeze. Our natural tendency is to interpret 'last things' as 'the end of the world', all of which is rather heavy-going and doom-laden, especially on a day when we also have a baptism.

So it's fortunate that that isn't what the gospel, or the other reading, are actually about. If we had been able to read a little further, we would see that it's the exact opposite. It's not about an end, but a beginning. In fact, to misquote Churchill, it is the beginning of the beginning. The sentence 'This is but the beginning of the birth pangs' gives the game away.

As he did so often with parables, Jesus starts with something very familiar, tangible and real, and then moves the discussion onto a different plane. This time he begins with something one of the disciples says: 'What large stones, and what large buildings!' Parts of the Temple were still being built at that time, so we can imagine them walking past the building site and someone making what was intended to be a passing comment. But Jesus picked it up and made what must have seemed an extraordinary statement, which so alarmed the inner circle of disciples that they asked him what warning they would get. Jesus' reply was probably equally unexpected, though they should have known by this stage. On the face of it, he said that all the Temple buildings would be destroyed. Interpreted metaphorically, he implied that everything people had got used to and relied on would be taken away. But rather than explaining how the buildings would be destroyed, he talked about people coming in his name who would lead his followers astray. He may have known that the Temple buildings would be destroyed about forty years later, but he spoke about threats and attempts to destroy his message about the kingdom of peace, truth, mercy and justice. The Jews had always known that the messiah would bring in this kingdom, and for centuries they had used the term 'birth pangs' to describe the events that would bring it to fruition. It wasn't the end of the world; it was to be the beginning of a new one.

Jesus knew that it would not be a smooth or easy transition. He knew what he was about to face, and he knew the obstructions, hardships and persecutions that his little band of followers would have to stand up to. He knew that many people would want to subvert his message for their own ends, and that others would want to suppress it completely because it didn't line up with their world view. If you read on beyond the end of the gospel passage you will find him giving the disciples careful instructions on how to behave when they saw those things starting to happen. He was not prophesying the end of the world, but the difficulties of bringing in God's new one.

As Sophia's mother (and every mother) knows, birth pangs are excruciating for a while, but they generally result in something very positive and wonderful. The birth pangs of God's new world have been going on for an extremely long time, and they are not over yet. But we know that they will end in the new kingdom, and that we can be its messengers, and that the best way to do that is, as Paul exhorts us everywhere in his letters, to live the 'kingdom life' now. Today's second reading

gives us three first-rate suggestions for doing this: we are to meet together, to encourage each other, and to provoke each other to love and good deeds.

I am very grateful to the translator who used 'provoke' in this context. Normally it is an uncomfortable, negative word – people are provoked into arguments, discord and violence. How splendid instead to provoke love and good deeds – and mercy, justice, truth and peace. These things won't creep in quietly while no-one is looking. They have to be vigorously worked at – provoked. We must prod, nudge and pester ourselves and each other: a sort of virtuous 'anything you can do, I can do better!' (Though Paul does also instruct us not to boast.)

I can't think of a better message for Sophia's baptism. She has arrived in the world as something positive and wonderful; she's turned her parents' lives upside down (every new baby does this, especially if it is the first), and her very existence is provoking love and good deeds. Now she's come to us at St Peter's to become part of the Christian family, and we have the privilege of welcoming and supporting her and her family with more love and good deeds. What a glorious way to spread the message of a new beginning.