

The theme for this week, to say the least, is not only complex but very depressing. In Matthew's Gospel (Chapter 24), paralleled in Mark (Chapter 13) and Luke (Chapter 21) there is reference to famines, earthquakes, torture, killings, wars, uprisings, mourning, darkness, anger and the spilling of blood, the abomination of desolation, the turning of friend against friend, relative against relative and the desecration and ruination of both the Temple and Jerusalem itself.

These chapters are, arguably, the most difficult in the gospels for us, as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians, to understand. They are Jewish chapters, steeped in Jewish history and ideas. Jesus uses images and concepts familiar to Jews of his day but ones strange and even unknown to most modern day Christians. Included are prophecies about the destruction of Jerusalem, warnings of persecution and dangers of the last days, of the Second Coming and of being on the watch. Although difficult to read and understand it is not really possible to disregard these chapters as they are a valuable insight about the Second Coming of Jesus. However, today, I am not focusing on the abomination of desolation, future destruction, or the images of the Second Coming. These themes need many Bible group sessions to discuss them. I want to focus on verse 13 "But whoever holds out to the end will be saved."

Those of you who used to watch Mastermind on TV will remember the famous phrase: "I have started, so I'll finish." Yet everywhere in daily life there is evidence of the opposite – a half eaten meal, a half finished picture, an lacklustre and brief attempt at a diet or unfinished programme to give up smoking; stories begun but never finished, doors without handles and half papered walls. In society, too, we are all too familiar with the painful situations caused by the abandonment of children, abandonment of pets, broken marriages, people skipping from responsibility to another, from relationship to relationship, from one chaotic situation to another.

I have no idea where you are in your experience of faith at THIS moment but I am aware that many who begin their faith journey give up. Others remain but their faith goes cold, they have no fight, to fight what Jesus portrays as a war. But Jesus wants us to go on and on and on. He outlines the difficulties of doing so. James, in his Epistle, writes, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." (James 1: 1-2)

I am reminded of the lyrics of Simon and Garfunkel's 1960s song, 'The Boxer' They tell the story of a young boy, tired, dirty, dishevelled and frustrated as he walks the streets of New York, trying to find a job and being rejected time after time. He battles the elements, dreaming dreams but, in reality, thinking of giving up and returning home. He meets a boxer, an average sort of boxer

who is not that good, but this boxer encourages the lad to stay in New York and keep looking. He hangs in there and stays.

The trials we face can, I am sure, get us down; they can tempt us and persuade us to give up. Reading about the images Jesus' speaks of in Matthew Chapter 24 does not make me any more confident. But these situations are meant as trials, they are not meant to cause us to give up. Jesus wants us to fight on and work our way through, He wants us to be more confident in our faith not less,

We are warned, by Jesus, in our Gospel reading, of false prophets. Again and again he mentions this. "Be on your guard and do not let anyone deceive you. Many, claiming to speak for me will come and say, 'I am the Messiah,' and they will deceive many people." (vv 4,5). He is building on what he said in the Sermon on the Mount about wolves in sheep's clothing.

Israel's history is littered with false prophets misleading the people. In Deuteronomy 13:1-4 we read: "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you, giving you a sign or a wonder, and this comes true, they will say, "Let us go after other gods and let us serve them." You shall not listen to the words of that prophet; for God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with your heart and soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; listen to His voice, serve Him, and CLING to Him."

In Jeremiah's time, false prophets were common. Jeremiah says ( 5:30-31) that an appalling and horrible thing has happened. The prophets prophesy falsely and my people love it! When one of God's true prophets spoke, the people hated it. Just before the Babylonian invasion, in which Jerusalem was destroyed, Jeremiah gave them God's message either to surrender or be destroyed. They threw Jeremiah down a well to sink in the mud, which clearly illustrates the people's desire to hear only what they wanted to hear.

In the New Testament, Paul gives Timothy a sober warning (2 Timothy 4:3-4): "The time will come when people will not listen to sound doctrine but will follow their own desires and will collect for themselves more and more teachers who will tell them what they are itching to hear. They will turn away from listening to the truth and give their attention to legends." Clearly we need to think about what we hear, read and observe. In effect we must question the teacher, the preacher, the book, the information to see if it really is in line with God's way and His truth. Quite a sobering thought!

William Barclay points out that it is so easy to mould Christianity. We have an infinite capacity for wishful thinking. So let us drop all these thoughts of suffering, destruction, false prophets and sacrifice. Isn't God's grace wide enough to cover every sin? Isn't God's grace the most wonderful thing in the universe? Surely the more we sin the more chance we will enjoy God's amazing grace! How twisted is this? How easy for people to think like this!

And it is so easy to overstress PART of God's truth, focusing on some and missing others. If we overstress that man is free to choose, we forget that God is in control. If we try to make Christianity attractive, we water it down. All of this Barclay calls heresy. And he claims another heretical paradox. As a Christian I have a responsibility of trying to understand God's truth. I am told to watch out for false prophets. Yet I am finite and God is infinite so how can I possibly understand? Barclay quotes GK Chesterton who wrote that "It is only the fool who tries to get the heavens inside his head and not unnaturally his head bursts. The wise man is content to get his head inside the heavens." However intellectual we are there will always be and always should be a mystery about God that we can only wonder at and never understand.

Where does this leave us? I want to make it clear that as I have started on my journey of faith I AM determined to finish. However weak my faith and my actions (and I assure you they can be very weak and feeble at times) I believe that the prize is so amazing, so wonderful, so awesome that I AM determined to be there at the end.

Paul writes to the Colossians (1: 10-12) (using the Message translation): We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul-not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking he Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us.

If we do finish wounded and tired, it doesn't matter. The boxer in Simon and Garfunkel's song bore the scars of some bloody fights, many of which he didn't win. It doesn't matter if we don't win every battle or even any battle, it matters that we finish.

So whatever happens, do not give up. Hang in there as I am determined to do so. Ask for support and guidance from our amazing God. In some way, great or small, confident or hesitant, strong or weak you, like me, have started. Whatever is in store, whatever trials need to be faced, be a victorious Christian who can say – Well, I've started, so I'll make sure I finish.