

2nd Sunday before Advent, 18 November 2018

Daniel 12:1-3; Rom.8:18-25; Mark 13:1-8:

This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Romans 8, verse 19: the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God ... to be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

The freedom of the glory of the children of God. As the King James Version puts it, the glorious liberty of the children of God. Men and women set free from all that makes them miserable, all that makes them small, all that binds them into decline and decay. We throw all this off, and in the words of the prophet Daniel, we shine like the brightness of the sky. That, my friends, is where we are heading. That is where Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead, is leading us. That's what resurrection means, and it is your destiny.

That's the Gospel. Whoever you are, however unglorious your life is, you can be caught up in Christ, in the great change unleashed through his cross and resurrection. Your body may be weak and failing, your mind may be beginning to fall apart, you may be guilty and bent over and broken in so many ways. Your life here may end in mess and failure and death: it *will* end in mess and failure and death. But keep your eyes on the prize. These things are not the end, they are but the beginnings of the birth pangs. Journey through them, and you will be born. Born again, and this time into glory. Into joy and beauty and goodness you can barely imagine now.

That is the Gospel. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, that's what awaits. You are not rubbish. Everything around you might say you are rubbish, the voices inside might whisper that you are rubbish, death might tempt you to believe it - but you are a beloved child of God and you are destined for glory. The things that seem so mighty and impressive and wonderful now – all the boasting of the powerful, the wealthy, the clever, their great buildings and their piles of money – all that will come to an end. What large stones, what large buildings, and Jesus says not one will be left, all will be thrown down. But *you*. Little, unimpressive, rubbish you: even the hairs of your head are numbered. *You* are immortal diamond. Because of Jesus, you are destined for glory.

So if all that's true, if I am God's beloved child, why do bad things keep happening? Why doesn't God look after me a bit better? I meet people who tell me they don't believe in God now, though they once did, because someone died, or someone got dementia, or some other dreadful kind of suffering happened. Why did God let it happen? And there are all sorts of answers Christian faith gives to that question, mostly about free will, and some of

them more convincing than others. But most of the time the Bible just says, in effect: what else did you expect? What else did you expect in this part of the story, at this stage in God's great making of things? The world isn't finished, yet. It isn't how God wants it, yet. It is still being made, it is still not perfect. What you're suffering now are the birth pangs. Just hold on. Keep the faith. The Kingdom is coming.

This is what the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus are all about. All of us know, or will know, what crucifixion is like: maybe what it is to suffer great physical pain, the shattering of hope, overwhelming loss. We know what it is to walk about wounded, tired, exhausted, bound into death. That's what it is to live in a world not yet made, a world still in the birth pangs. What for now we know only in part is what it means for all that to be turned around, to be changed, to be made resurrection. We know it a bit, in glimmer of joy in all sorts of ways. But they are but glimmers, promises, the beginnings of the dawn. Now we know only in part, one day we shall know fully, we shall see face to face. We'll see that the crucified man, the broken one, him and not another, is made eternally beautiful, good, joyful. God takes his broken body, and makes it shine like the sun. It's as if – it's not just as if, *it is* – that God shows what he intends for everyone of us, for the whole creation, by taking this one life, Jesus, and doing it there. He writes small there, in one life, one body, what will one day be writ large across the whole universe. What will one day, be made true in us.

What do you need to do? There's nothing to do, but have faith. Have faith, in all your misery, in all the disaster that life throws your way, have faith that Jesus in his cross and resurrection shows you the truth. All this pain – whatever it is – but the birth pangs. Depression, sickness, grief, broken-ness: it is all the birth pangs. Jesus has been there already, and he has opened up a path to the other side. Trust him. Follow him, through whatever it is. And he will bring you out into the glorious liberty of the children of God. And it, and you, will be beautiful.

Amen.

Peter Waddell