Sermon **1 Samuel 1.4-20**
November 18, 2018 **Psalm 16**
Proper 28B **Hebrews 10.14-25**
The Rev. Gary R Brower, PhD **Mark 13.1-8**

Unlike several of the last few Sundays, this Sunday, Proper 28, is one I anticipate every year. There are several reasons. The first is that next Sunday is one of my favorite Sundays of the year: Christ the King Sunday. We get to sing so many great hymns, full of pomp and majesty. And, second, Christ the King Sunday precedes the first Sunday of Advent, and we enter into one of my favorite seasons of the church year, a respite from green vestments and, despite the bustle of the month, a quieter, more reflective time. So, there's a lot of anticipation associated with THIS Sunday.

But, there's a third reason as well . . . and this one's the most important for me. The Collect of the Day is probably one of the most memorable prayers of the church year, and one, I imagine, many of us love. Who can't appreciate the imagery: "Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them" (BCP, 236)? It's just so evocative! And, if you've been around Anglicans/ Episcopalians long enough, you'll have heard "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" applied to all sorts of things aside from Scripture.

Beyond the imagery, however, I love this Collect because . . . well, I love Scripture. I've earned WAY too many degrees in religion, and so I've been steeped in biblical studies. I've learned multiple ancient languages so I can go deeper into the text. And, this last Friday — almost providentially in advance of today — I spent all day downtown at a training in my favorite Bible software program. Oh, the things you can do with that program! I had to restrain myself from plugging my computer into the projector just to show you! It was so tempting to share with you how we can "read" and "mark" them. But prudence restrained me. That . . . and the lessons set for today. I had hoped that there would be some appropriate selection — maybe something from Proverbs, or that well-known passage from 2 Timothy 3.16: "All scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people's lives and teaching them to be upright". But, no, our lessons take us in a different direction . . . I think.

As a point of departure, then, I'll return to the Gospel of Mark. These eight verses hold so much, both on the surface and in their implications. You'll recall that, last week, Jesus warned his disciples against regarding the large sums of money the wealthy were putting in the temple treasury more highly than the two small coins that the widow had contributed. And, now, that they're leaving the temple, the disciples point again to "majesty": "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (13.1). Jesus, once again, has to deflate their fixation on the flashy things: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (2). The teachings of Jesus have been consistent all along: "Quit looking at things the way everyone else does! That is not God's vision!".

But, then, the disciples' attention shifts. It's almost as if they're beginning to grasp what's going on. They and Jesus are sitting across a valley from the temple, looking back at it. And the inner circle asks "Tell us , when will this (disaster) be, and what will be the sign that these things

are about to be accomplished?". Jesus' answer is vague, but timeless: there will be imposters, wars and famines. War and instability that ended with the destruction of the Temple was the context that stands behind the writing of Mark's Gospel . . . and there were false prophets roaming around at the time. So, whether or not Jesus and his disciples actually had this conversation in the few days before his crucifixion, or Mark is projecting his own present onto the past, there was clearly a worry that things might come crashing down. But that, of course, opens the way for new "construction", whether actual or "virtual", as reflected in John's Gospel: "'Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (2.19).

Clearly, the Romans did destroy the Temple and Jerusalem. And this destruction was pivotal for the Jews at the time, and for future Judaism. A religion that had much of its basis in temple, sacrificial, ritual had lost its center. What was to become of it? Well, we know. The Sadducees, who were, along with the levitical priesthood, responsible for the temple rites, shortly disappeared. The Pharisees, who had really arisen the previous time that the Jews were separated from the Temple — the Babylonian exile — lived on and morphed into, what has become, modern Judaism, a religion based on ethics, textual study and home-based rituals. (An orthodox rabbi friend of mind is quick to point out that HE is a Pharisee!). And the Christians, well, we survived as well, accepting Jesus as the expected messiah and creating a religious structure different from the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but reflecting many of their concerns.

How this development began has been shown in our readings from the book of Hebrews over the last few weeks. You'll recall a lot of discussion about priests, high priests — including Melchizedek — and temple ritual. There are mentions of sacrifices and rites, such as today's references to offerings (10.14, 18) and sprinklings (22). But there are also pointers to a different, underlying, basis for our faith. The author of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds" (10.16 // Jer 31.33-34). And he exhorts the believers not to neglect coming together — that is, in the words in the Acts of the Apostles (also written after the Temple's destruction, when the infant church was developing): to continue "[devoting] themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2.42).

The implication from both Mark and Hebrews — reflecting the realities of life after the destruction of the Temple — is that things that are torn down — "not a stone will be left on a stone" (Mark 13. 2) — can be rebuilt. That doesn't mean it will be easy; the early church, as well as Christianity's subsequent reformers, can attest to all the difficulties associated with "death and rebirth". It's something to which most of us can witness as well. I would guess that few of us believe precisely the same way as we did when we were children. For a living faith, such a cycle of destruction/reconstruction is pretty much necessary.

Many years ago, like many candidates for ordination, I had to take a course in Clinical Pastoral Education. It was an opportunity for the students to take an incident from our work and discuss it within the group — to learn what we did well, and where we could improve. One of my fellow students — I'll call him "Jim" — came in with a story about him being falsely accused of something, I can't remember exactly what. But the accusation was serious enough that it could jeopardize his future. At the church he served, there was a lot of back-biting and gossip, and Jim had become the focal point. Jim couldn't understand how, in the church, such

behavior could be found. He was emotionally and spiritually a wreck. There seemed to be little way forward for him, and we all sympathized with him.

At some point in our conversation, I pointed out to him that what it seemed like was happening — aside from the false accusation — was that his vision of the church was being destroyed, and that he was grieving the loss. He raised his head, looked at me, wiped his tears, and said, "You know, you're right". Everything seemed to shift for him in that moment. He said something to the effect of, "Well, I'm not going to give up on ministry; I'm just going to have a develop a different, more realistic, theology of *Church*." The following week he returned, having charted a path forward with the situation at his congregation, as well as in his own understanding about the sometimes messy human-ness of Christian community.

Things come crashing down around us all the time. Sometimes they're personal situations, such as Jim's. Other times they're larger in scope. I think, for example, over the last few years, of the #BlackLives Matter and the #MeToo movements, as well as the unfolding of the clergy abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. Despite those who would have us look back to some fantasy yester-year, or turn a blind eye to what's been happening, all of them have pointed to figurative "stones" in the "temple" of our society and culture that have needed to come down. Yes, there's pain involved — more for some than for others, <u>and</u> there is resistance involved. But the rebuilding is necessary; it will take time and great resolve. But there can be great promise. I recall a line from a prayer by Sikh author Valerie Kaur , "What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?"

As I close, I'd like to circle back to our Collect. We, as Christians, have at our disposal a <u>wonderful</u> resource in any rebuilding process: personal, societal, or even here at Good Shepherd in our season of change and transition. It's called Holy Scripture. In this collection of "songs and stories, prophecies and precepts", we have a record of how God's people have, throughout the centuries, found the wisdom and strength to adapt and rebuild. For Christians, this process finds its model in the stories of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is a testimony of hope.

"Reading, learning, marking and inwardly digesting" <u>this book</u> takes more than a glance at the bumper sticker on the car ahead of us. It demands time, and its understanding is enhanced in the presence of a community of fellow-seekers. The Collect challenges us to spend time in <u>this book</u> to find the way forward. Opportunities for study exist here; more will be coming. If you have questions, or need guidance, please let me know. As I said at the beginning, "I love scripture!" And I would hope that you do too!

Amen.