

I recall a number of years ago, on our first camping trip to France, we spent some time in the French Alps. At this stage Anthony was less than 2. On this particular day we headed off to visit Chamonix to have a look at Mont Blanc. Anthony slept in the car for most of the journey. A few miles short of Chamonix, we got our first view of Mont Blanc and we stopped the car to get out and have a look. Anthony woke up as we took him out of the car and I will never forget the look of sheer wonder on his face as he caught sight of the snow covered mountains.

Our Gospel passage tells of the reaction of the disciples to the sight of the Temple. The language of the passage implies a similar sense of wonder, of amazement. Brought up in the villages on the shores of Lake Galilee they would have heard of the Temple, maybe listened as neighbours spoke of a visit to the Temple but one senses that nothing will have prepared them for the scale, the sheer grandeur of the place. The reaction of Jesus to their amazement, as he spoke of its imminent destruction, must have been quite shocking. A distorted account of his reaction will subsequently appear as evidence at his trial. To all who saw the Temple, it would have stood as something immutable, immovable, there for all time, as unshakeable as God himself.

Staying with our Gospel reading, this whole 13th chapter of Mark's Gospel is sometimes referred to as the 'Markan Apocalypse.' As with similar passages we see in say Daniel and Revelation, we need to set them in the context and culture of the times in which they were written. Some Christian groups will try to see these passages and interpret them in terms of series of forecasts of future events and then can get very caught up in trying to identify passages that refer to contemporary political events on the world stage. In fact the writers were as much referring to events in their own day, challenging their hearers to recognise God acting decisively in the here and now of their own time and place. St Mark's Gospel itself reached its final written form some thirty years after the events it described. In that period there was the upheaval of the Jewish rebellions and the destruction of Jerusalem, the experience of early persecution, the movement of the Church

out into the Gentile world. The early Church was trying to make sense of tumultuous events that were going on around it, the pressures it was under from the Jewish tradition from which it had emerged and the Graeco-Roman societies into which it was moving at a rapid pace. Some were wanting to pull it back into its Jewish roots, others wanting it to embrace the diversity of the Graeco-Roman world.

In the face of the impatient questions of the disciples as to when all this is going to happen, we read of Jesus calling the disciples to a process of discernment, of avoiding a rush to instant judgement. Do not rush into following this person or that person; do not jump to conclusions about this event or that.

Earlier this week we witnessed the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. On one of the current affairs programmes, Michael Portillo, a member of the British Government at that time, confessed that up to a short time before the coming down of the Berlin Wall, he had thought that the wall, the power of the Soviet Bloc and the whole system that underpinned it was destined to be a permanent feature of the international scene for the foreseeable future.

As I watched the news bulletins this week and listened to the various commentators, I recalled a conversation I had with a lady from Estonia at the European Meeting organised by the Taizé community in Budapest over the Christmas/New year period in 1991/92. She was talking of the events that had seen the sudden liberation of her country from Russian domination. ‘We must never forget,’ she said, ‘that this is something we prayed for for years.’ She understood the political and social developments that lead up to this moment but in her heart she saw it quite simply as a God given act of redemption.

The prophets of old were called to read the signs of their own times. They looked at what was happening round about them. They interpreted the present moment in terms of their understanding of Israel’s God and Israel’s faithfulness or lack of faithfulness. They stood

in the courts of kings and town squares and challenged the nation to see the problems that lay at the heart of their situation. We are coming back round again to this issue of discernment, of understanding the significance of events, of what is of lasting value.

Christians in each generation are called to look at things differently, to look at the issues of their day from the perspective of faith, to be look at the way we live, to look at the values of the world about us.

Earlier in the week, I was talking to a parent in the School and asking him how his business was going. He said things had slowed down and so his turnover was down and he did have less money in his pocket. But then he went on to say, he now had more time to spend. He was now coming home and 6:30 instead of 10 and so was spending more time with his family, with his children. In the light of the change in his circumstances he was looking at things differently, even questioning things he had taken for granted.

One expression that has been used in recent times to describe our society over the last few years is that “we lost the run of ourselves”. In the coming weeks, as we approach the budget, as we go through the whole process of consultations, industrial unrest, as we hear and feel the anger in some quarters about how our things have turned out, it is a to reflect on where we are going as a society. We are now drawing towards the beginning of Advent, a period of reflection before we celebrate the Festival of Christmas. A time perhaps of discernment , of understanding the times, a time to ask ourselves as individuals and as a society, ‘What is God saying in and through this whole situation?’