

PREACHED IN THE PARISH OF St JAMES, MONCTON

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

Years ago, my father worked as a carpenter on an extension of Stella Maris Roman Catholic Church in Black's Harbour. Several times he told us the story of how the daily Mass took place all the way through the construction. The workmen would be asked to lay down their tools and wait until the mass was done. Something very similar happened under King Herod when he rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem to be one of the largest buildings in the ancient world—the daily sacrifices took place in the midst of all the construction, every day whatever was being done had to be finished in order for the animals and the priests to come in and continue the service of God, which it was felt, would never cease again. Gwen and I spent the week before last in New York City, on Times Square, and there's a city in which life goes on continually while at the very same time the hugest skyscrapers are going up everywhere right above your heads. The construction sites open directly onto the side walks and great delivery trucks and wheel barrows appear almost everywhere. The construction workers were eat their lunches among the tourists and the business people on the sidewalks. It's all part of the energy of the city that never sleeps. Maybe some of you found your way through Heathrow Airport when it was being reconstructed in the 1980's---I'm sure there will be another reconstruction anytime. Archbishop Miller used to compare the reformation of the church that is happening in our own time, as parish after parish tries to adapt to all the changes going on in our societies and families, to having to repair a 747 jet airplane while it is in midflight. And think of the past two and half years---in our parishes and our schools and our workplaces and hospitals, as everything still had to go on in the midst of a pandemic that we still can't get our minds around.

So we can, in the midst of all our adjustments, and planning, losing and gaining, coming and going, truly hear the words of the dispossessed, interrupted life of Jeremiah the prophet as his city is destroyed and the people are languishing in exile, and finding that he could indeed offer them hope. Listen again: 'Just as I--- the Lord—have watched over [the people] to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord.'

Day by day, in the midst of life as it happens, God is constructing----and, not to overlook the other image in Jeremiah—planting. (Which reminds me to try to remember to get some more bulbs in the ground before the ground starts to freeze.)

This same awareness of God's continual beneficent pushing forward despite it all is behind the epistle of Paul to Timothy and the Gospel according to St Luke. Two things about this subversive work, then, this morning.

Paul tells Timothy: Be persistent, the older apostle tells the young fellow, be persistent whether the time is *favourable* or *unfavourable*, convince, *rebuke*, and *encourage*, with the utmost patience. Gwen and I figured out the subway system in New York after a few misses—one of which will be a great sermon illustration someday. We went into our closest station behind two construction workers who were obviously good friends. I would think the work would be exhausting and they would only be able to trudge along, but that was not the case. They were sauntering. When we thankfully got our way down to the tip of Manhattan to what we had gone to look at, suddenly there were the same two guys, still chatting to each other, walking merrily along to another huge construction site, I guess operated by the same company. It's not only that they were working on the desconstruction and reconstruction of a huge project—but clearly in the midst of it finding joy and satisfaction in this small jaunt down to the tip of the island. Jeremiah's promise to the people in the midst of it all is that the construction, the planting, that God is 'busy about is heart surgery: he is writing his word, his promise, his law, on our very hearts. You'd never want to see open heart surgery, I don't think, but apparently surgeons often listen to music or even whistle, while they're tearing things apart in order to put them back together. How fortunate any of us is when we can find that confident joy in the chaos of life. I had been ordained for decades before I really realized that *gospel* does indeed mean good news, not bad news. Paul tells Timothy, do the work of an evangelist—a good news fellow. Do what you can actually do every day, and leave rest of the big picture to God.

The second point comes in the very busy picture of the widow and the corrupt judge—the parable about the people's need to pray always and not to lose heart. Justice was then, and really should be now, a very public thing. It needs to be seen to be done. It was done on the side of the streets. Sometimes then as now a source of almost entertainment. This judge is tormented by the persistence of a woman who has nothing to lose. Unlike the construction workers, he got worn out. So

we all find out in life that keeping on keeping on will keep us in the presence of the good Lord who simply does not get worn out. Will the Lord delay long in helping? I tell you he will grant justice to them.” Be persistent, Paul tells Timothy.

We were on the sixteenth floor of a brand-new hotel in the Big Apple—opened on Valentine’s day we were told---we booked our rooms in March. Funny how even as the construction of the building was on-going, the tourist people were busy booking rooms. Out our window, on 47th street, below us, was a gothic church. Eventually, by persistence if you don’t mind, I found out it was the very famous St Mary the Virgin parish. The churches in Manhattan are indeed the only truly old buildings—once they dominated the skyline: St Patrick’s Cathedral, St Paul’s Chapel in the World Trade Centre, Trinity Church, Wall St. They’ve seen immense changes—no, they’re *seeing* immense changes, happening all around them. It’s certainly no longer a village church which it was at one time. It’s literally squashed between high rises. We were able to walk five minutes and go into the most serene place you can imagine. An immense ceiling that you would never know when you look down on it from a high rise. The music was heavenly. We eventually were able to hear the bells of St Mary’s morning and evening as the prayers were said every day—continually in the midst of all the construction and all the comings and goings of that crowded place.

Every day for more than a century. Human hearts being written upon. The Lord watching over to build and to plant. Good people praying always and never—that we could see at least---losing heart.