Second Sunday before Advent - Mark 13 vv 1-5

We had a very homely passage of scripture read to us this morning.
May I remind you of the occasion and what was said?
Jesus and four of His closest friends went on a morning walk, as seemed to be their custom. I notice that our Lord set great store by walking and talking. We know how He would use some view, some particular person, some particular activity which they came across as they walked and talked - He would use it to make His point or to help His friends to understand what He meant. You can think of the Farmer sowing his seed and the lessons Jesus taught from the man and what he was doing. Or perhaps you could think of the woman turning her house upside down in tears, because she had mislaid something special. He would point to her joy and happiness when she found it. Jesus taught by using homely illustrations wherever possible. The illustration would be easily remembered and make a huge impression - as we shall see in a minute or so.

So, the four of them with Jesus are having a bracing walk, and when they get out of puff they sit down on the hillside overlooking Jerusalem with the massive temple in centre stage. You've probably got a view in your mind of York Minster like a galleon in full sail across the plain of York! There are so many striking views of the Minster from the many approaches to York. That is something like the view the apostles saw of the Temple. The conversation was down to earth. The sheer size of the Temple and its precincts was unforgettable. More than that, the acres of huge stone stirred their imagination. How could men handle such huge and weighty material, let alone carve and shape it, and then lift it up piece by piece into position. This was a building such as was seldom seen, and it was the material used by craftsmen for carving and creating something to remember for ever. These were the thoughts which must have gone chasing through the minds of the disciples. Most of all, the total impression must have been concerned with age. How long could such a building last? Their answer seemed to be that it was indestructible and would stand for ever. It would surely stand the test of time. That featured in their discussion. You and I can understand that bit of their thinking because, even today, size and scale suggest a building can stand for ever.

When someone told me recently of the proposals to put huge blocks of stone at the west end of the Minster to protect it, I can remember thinking, "Surely it is so well built, so well grounded, it will stand there for ever, come what may." But then my mind told me that we live in difficult times when even the most sacred and well-built places can be reduced to rubble. It's an impossible thought, but it's true. I remembered seeing earlier this year pictures of those fabulous buildings in Iraq, some of them counted as the world’s treasures, but now ruined and reduced to rubble by descendants of the very people who built them centuries ago, before the Christian era. The world thought that with careful preservation they would stand for ever as a memorial of the Persian empire, but all we have now are pictures taken in the last century and in more recent times. The message is that we live in a changing world of values which belie our inmost thoughts.

Coming back to the discussion of this subject between Jesus and His friends, we can see how they tried to read the future from portents that they saw around them. Again, this is something people try to do today. Jesus was against such things. He encouraged His friends to be watchful, but not to guess the future or what might happen. He said, "Chance NO. Change YES.”  Jesus resisted the idea that things happen by chance, but He accepted they do change as society changes and they follow the will of the people. Today's reading suggests to me that God is somehow involved in purposeful change and uses it purposefully, but chance plays no part in God's plan. This is a hard question and we each have to think about it and make up our own minds. How does God work in the ups and downs of life? Does He respond to chance or is He involved in the changes which we make in what He has done in creation?

William Neil, a former professor of theology at Aberdeen university, said this episode in St. Mark's gospel
Is the most difficult one to explain. He takes the view that our Lord is not like those of His day who tended to read the signs of the times and attracted quite a following. Jesus does not seem to use apocalyptic language. That is figurative language, imaginative language, about the end of time. Rather, He takes the view that God is at work in the events of everyone’s life, and in the events of history, as far as nations are concerned. I think we could say this is the general view of Christians today, but you remember how our Lord insisted that we have to be watchful and pray about change.

To be practical, Jesus reminds us that evil has a way of presenting itself as something good, as indeed He was well aware that there were people who presented themselves as other Christs. Be on your guard, He says. Watch and pray that you get it right or you might find yourselves in a worse situation than before.
Maybe the situation we find ourselves in today calls for Christians of all denominations to try to understand this Brexit business, and having tried to see the many sides to it, to pray that the decisions put forward are appropriate. To be practical, let us hold up to God those members of the legislature who are striving to ensure the right way forward for our country. Remember especially Teresa May and her Cabinet, and all those involved in discussions here and in Europe. We are asked to watch and pray. This is a crucial decision for our country, affecting all, whether rich or poor, employed or unemployed, young or old. So, we ask that God will bless change and encourage us all to surround those involved with our prayers and our goodwill.

At such a time as this, we hold up to Him our families and friends and those who have asked for our prayers, May God bless us all with His love and His grace and help us to understand that He is present in all our undertakings and He wants only what is for our greater good. Jesus did His best to drive that home to His nearest and dearest friends.

That was the gist of the conversation He had with His friends that particular morning. I hope these thoughts and words of mine may help us see a little bit more behind one of the most difficult passages in scripture. God doesn't work with chance, but He does use change, and He may use it for the betterment of us all.