Mark 13:24-37.

There are some things in our lives that we never forget. And when you get old, like me, there is a tendency to look back and remember. There is one morning in the October of 1962 that I will never forget. It was a beautiful autumnal morning and I was on my way back home. My usual bus was late, so I took a bus into the centre of Stockport. It was double decker, but I sat downstairs in the middle on the left. In those days, each bus had a conducter whose job was to sell the bus tickets. Just a few minutes into the journey, a discussion started behind me, between the bus conductor and the passengers behind me. Its theme was the likelihood of a nuclear war breaking out in the next few days. I was just 14 at the time, so I didn’t join in the discussion. But I was deeply impressed by the quality and tone of the debate.

Thirty years later, I was to visit the Royal Airforce base at Laarbruck and to be told not to go for a walk on the far side of the base. “We keep the buckets of sunshine there and the patrol dogs are trained to kill.” The nuclear bombing force there was part of the Nato strategic doctrine know as MAD. Mutual assured destruction. The Government of North Korea appears to seek a return to the good old days. But that is only one of the many things that might lead us into anxiety and cause us to lose hope.

At first glance this morning’s gospel reading seems to be like the trailer of one of those apocalyptic films, where only Superman or in these emancipated days, Wonder Woman can save us. However, a quick glance at the text before some comforting words or a political rant will not do. It is a very difficult text and requires a lot of work. So, let’s get cracking.

If you look at the reading in your bulletin, you will see that it is from Mark’s gospel ch 13. If you were to read the whole of that chapter, you would discover that Jesus is on his final visit to Jerusalem and has just visit the temple. This was a building, that was breath takingly magnificent. It was massive and ornate. For it was nothing less than the dwelling place of God on earth- the point of contact between God and his people- the place where the bond between them was cemented by prayer and the sacrifices of the priesthood. “Look teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings! “

Look, says Jesus, all these great buildings. Not one stone here will be left on another, everyone will be thrown down.” The disciples are so deeply shocked that they shut up. They wait for at least an hour and only when they have reached a place where they can talk without being overheard, that the four leading disciples, pluck up the courage to ask when it will happen?

There are three things I wish to highlight in this passage and in the chapter as a whole.

First, Jesus does not tell them or us, when the end of the world will come. He talks about false prophets, persecution and the pestilence of war. In the early part of the chapter, not as a tick list so that we can get ready for the end, but as a reminder that all suffering is part of a history over which God is Lord and which he will bring to its fulfillment. Thus bad times should not reduce us to anxiety or panic. Just the opposite, these events are not a world that is out of control, but a world that is moving to an end. A world where God is there, but almost hidden in the fog of war and the darkness of man’s inhumanity to man.

Secondly, when all seems dark and the stars are falling from heaven , then we will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. It is the humanity of God who then gathers in his people. We don’t hear a word about anyone else, for that would be to distract from the central thrust of this passage. God does not forget his people.

Thirdly, in the meantime, each of us has a task to fulfil. It is like a landowner who leaves his estate and puts his slaves in charge of the estate. Each has his work to do. The events of the present time mean that none of us is out of work, or retired or of no significance to God. For we are not called to be passive victims, but to keep awake. Watchful that no one deceives us, on our guard in persecution and ready for the coming of our Lord.

With this renew and awaken vision of the world around us, John Keeble’s words will be true of us: -

**Old friends, old scenes, will lovelier be,  
as more of heaven in each we see;  
some softening gleam of love and prayer  
shall dawn on every cross and care.  
  
The trivial round, the common task,  
will furnish all we ought to ask:  
room to deny ourselves; a road  
to bring us daily nearer God.**