

War of the worlds/words

Psalm 124; Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 20-22; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50 J Shannon

Have you ever noticed the lectionary sometimes feels like this?¹ The gears are all working together but somehow, it's out of sync: like not matching the seasons in the Southern hemisphere or annual events and festivals. There's a reason, I know. The Common lectionary is discussed and decided on a global scale and the southern hemisphere is only ½ the globe. They can't take in everything. But -

Last week in the Jewish Calendar it was Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – the day of atonement and the Jewish New Year. Both are really significant holidays and not a word in the selected scriptures. This week, we have Esther and the birth of Purim. Purim was the 26th of February 2021 – not 26 September. See what I mean? – the gears match but they are on different time wheels.

We didn't read Esther this morning so I'll just recap. Once again, the sword of Damocles was hanging over the Jewish people and Esther saved them. Purim is the after-party. It is like a Jewish Mardi Gras with *way* too much food and alcohol. There's costumes and dancing! It is the only festival of outrageous joy on the Jewish calendar. – and I have to say, is somewhat of an embarrassment to the more conservative element.

No wonder it's a party. The Bible repeatedly pictures the people of God as a beleaguered community either just coming out of a period of oppression, sitting in vulnerability or anticipating the next disaster. Distress is never far away.

The Psalm was based on a specific event – which was then generalised to prove a point. It says, imagine if He was *not* on our side. Look what could have happened. There's a lot of 'if's' in there and the writer did that on purpose.

Life is precarious and they live with constant threat and paranoia.

Geoff and I have been watching *War of the Worlds* ... but in small doses. The TV series is based on the HG Wells' 1938 radio play originally narrated by Orson Welles. When it was broadcast nationally from the Mercury theatre in NY, it caused wide spread panic. People really thought it was an alien invasion.

¹ Above the speaker was a silent moving image of golden gears of all sizes engaging and revolving

In the TV series (season 2)², the world has been taken over by aliens; the majority of the population are already dead and the survivors are being picked off one by one. They are living a cat and mouse existence: always alert; always on the move. Every episode is about survival for another day. The stress of living under constant threat is changing them. It is changing how they think of who they are; what they know about themselves and it's changing their relationships. Suspense and heightened tension electrify every episode from beginning to end. Do not watch this before bed!

The Old Testament can sometimes seem like an alien language or an alien landscape.

I get that sense from Psalm 124. 'We dodged it this time ...but tomorrow is another day. How we survive that?' What saves them is the third player in the 'us and them' game...

God.

So let's turn to Mark and what that might look like in this world. How do the cogs fit?

Whoever is not against us is for us ...again, 'Whoever is not against us is for us' once again, a third player – but this time, is it God?

The disciples ask whether they should put a stop to this other fellow, unknown guru, who was driving out demons, successfully. Clearly he was not one of 'us'.

I have to stop here and give you a little back-story because their question is not entirely innocent. Remember in both Mathew 17:16 and Luke 9:40, it is told that the boys in the band (the disciples) failed to cure the epileptic boy and the father was disappointed. He went to Jesus and told Him they had failed. Jesus is more than a little cheesed.³

So having suffered a humiliating failure, might they be a little jealous of this healer? We don't need him in *our* club.

But Jesus says, 'no', anyone who believes – they're ours, whether you know them or not.

² Which bears little resemblance to the original play and subsequent book.

³ Matthew 17:16

¹⁶ I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

Luke 9:38-40

. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

And uses the same reverse language of the psalm – who ever is *not* against us is for us.

To me, what stands out is our Christian diversity. The men and women down the road, in all the other churches, they do it differently but as long as ‘the cup of water is in His name,’ we are together. So God *is* the 3rd person in there...As long as...

And then scripture adds the ‘buts’... as long as they look after their own house. (add another cog in the works)

Which reminds me. Friday, I had to participate in the mandatory Code of ethics refresher. It is all the ‘Buts’: the rules for Ministers and lay leaders in this church. I am grateful. Many of the independent churches do not have the comfort or the protection of good housekeeping rules. Our rules are active and kept alive.

This reading in Mark throws the responsibility back onto us...us as the church. We are not immune to sinfulness. God leaves it to us to keep our house in order. Bad behaviour must be called out and dealt with; Not just because we have a rule book but because we are scripturally directed.

The onus is on us. So while some like it sweet with no sheep left behind, it actually our responsibility to protect the whole flock. Even if it means ‘cutting off a foot’.

By the way, the current moral issue for the characters in *War of the World* is, Do they sacrifice one to save the whole? We may have to ask ourselves this question very soon.⁴

So where do we go from there?

There is hope. I am reading *Matthew Flinders Cat*. In the book a homeless alcoholic has admitted himself to the Salvation Army Detox centre. After he’s processed, rubbed and scrubbed, he enters the ward where he will go through withdrawal. In huge, fire engine red letters on an expansive wall was the message, “There is hope”. Through his delirium the words danced, bounced, changed, grew and shrunk but the words were always there.

⁴ NSW Government road-map to post-COVID opening puts the onus on the churches to decide whether they will allow unvaccinated into services. It is likely that our church will allow congregations to decide for each locality.

We turn to James....and another cog engages.

This is a reading that could send us scurrying into our corners about those who believe in an interventionist God and those who don't. Let's step aside from that for a moment. To put this passage in context, James is all about moderating our speech, to each other, to the world and even in our prayers. Just as the disciples may have been a little jealous of the successful healer, we, as Christians, get a little jumped up about prayer.

The question is whether we treat it as a tool or a gift. And where does the power and the healing lie? Prayer cannot become a tool that Christians own and by which they believe they can manipulate God.

Prayer is both a chorus and a dialogue. The passage is about appropriate speech.

The power of prayer in this passage rests in each other and the power of being church. 'Let them call on the Elders of the Church' ... to anoint them in the name of the church. The Elders and the church (us) also have power – not just God.

We are called to have honesty with each other, the church and God.

Once again, God is the third player and while this passage makes some confusing assertions about what prayer can and cannot do, it is clear that God grants prayer – as a gift: A rope and a wailing wall.

Your very own hot line.

Your very own blankie.

Prayer is the honest doorway where you can drop your bundle and run.

Prayer is the rock you can scramble onto from the raging sea.

Prayer is the quiet place where you nestle your sorrow.

When the war of your worlds is raging, prayer is the peaceful garden where you can rest. And sometimes, hear God walking.

The gift of prayer is the big red letters against the wall that tells us again and again, "There is hope".

And there I end with the image of the cogs again. They may be going in different directions, at different speeds but they are engaged and working together. Including our 'third player' – God. *That* is the message of James and Mark today. And *that* is where hope lies.

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