

The End is the Beginning

Daniel 12:1-3

Mark 13:1-8

Jacob, age 92, and Rebecca, age 89, are very excited about their decision to get married. They go for a stroll to discuss the wedding and on the way they pass a drugstore. Jacob suggests they go in.

"Are you the owner?" Rebecca asks.

"Yes," says the pharmacist.

"We're about to get married," says Jacob. "Do you sell heart medication?"

"Of course we do."

"How about medicine for circulation?"

"All kinds."

"Do you have medicine for rheumatism?" Rebecca asks.

"Definitely."

"Medicine for memory problems, arthritis, Jaundice?"

"Yes, a large variety. The works."

"What about vitamins, sleeping pills, and Geritol?" Rebecca asks.

"Absolutely."

"Do you sell wheelchairs and walkers?" Jacob wants to know.

"All speeds and sizes."

"Wonderful!" says Rebecca. "We'd like to use your store as our Bridal Registry!"

In these times of incredible change, our story which is amusing now, is one which we know would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. It is perhaps an illustration of how dramatic these times are, of how the familiar is disappearing and the unfamiliar is becoming the norm. These times are known as end times, when the world is rapidly altering and we feel bereft, wishing that the good old days were still with us.

In certain scholarly realms, it has been suggested that we are now living in the post Christian or post modern era. But in others it has been

suggested that what we are experiencing is more closely linked to the pre-Christian era, the era which gave birth to the early Christian church, when faith in the Christ was not the norm, and Christians accepted that the world did not embrace their beliefs or their values, and they were called to live their lives in an often wordless witness to their beliefs. And so we hear today's gospel lesson against that background, a background of end times.

In the gospel according to Mark we are assured that end times are like child birth — that those times when our world is changing most dramatically are times which bear the promise of new birth.

A good friend of mine once told me that when she was told that she was pregnant her first thought was one of amazement that there was a new life in there. Her second, she said, was the sudden, sobering realization that **that** new life would have to come out. Although we are often excited about the prospect of new life, we are not equally thrilled with the prospect of birthing that new life, nor are we always prepared for the adjustments that come with the period directly before and after the birthing process.

But when we look at the Luke's (and Luca's) and the Zachary's, the Ella's and the Hannah's, and all the other little people we've welcomed; when we look at all of the promise, and all of the hope that lies in our arms or staggers around us, we recognise that the time of labour and delivery is truly worth it. For a new life is a fresh start, a blank slate upon which the future has yet to make even a single mark. We have no idea what lies ahead, but we are filled with fresh faith and renewed belief in what may be.

That's what Mark tells us about times of great change within our world — that they will be like times of giving birth, with all of the struggle, the discomfort, the pain, the risk, and the unpredictability of childbirth, but also with all of the hope, all of the faith, and all of the belief as well.

We are in just such a time right now. Our world is changing. The familiar is coming to an end and we cannot quite predict what lies ahead. It is an uncomfortable time, like the last days of pregnancy: a time when we cannot find just the right way to sit or rest, a time we wish would yield to a

more restful, more relaxed time.

Mark assures us that that time will come — but it is not yet. For we are birthing a new age, in every aspect of our lives, and the process is neither comfortable nor relaxed. But it is a time when we are more aware of our need for God, and for confidence in God. It's a time when we are reminded that the birth of the Christian church was neither comfortable nor easy. And so we are heartened because every great age is preceded by distress and uncertainty.

When families prepare for the birth of a child they are often caught by surprise by how disruptive the baby's arrival actually is. Life is not exactly as it was before. There are all kinds of adjustments to be made, and nothing can prepare us for this reality except the experience itself.

So it is with our world and our lives. Each time we make a transition no one can really communicate with us all of the adjustments of living and thinking that will have to be made. We long for the familiar. We'd like to go back. How many times have we laughed as we've heard stories of women, well along in labour, who announce that they've changed their minds. It's uneasy laughter for we understand, whether we have given birth or not, what it is to wish for the past, even as we know that we cannot go back. We know what it is to set out along an unfamiliar path, only to wish we had never begun.

And so today's passage is a source of comfort. It reminds us that although we may not go back, for we can never return to the past, no matter how strong our longing may be, we are assured that there is something better after we have made the transition, that new life is the promise before us.

of baptism — the promise of new life, the certainty that we do not make these transitions alone, the assurance that the Christ has made these transitions as well, and understands all of our struggles, all of our fears, and all of our uncertainties. We are also promised that the Christ will be with us as we anticipate all that this new life may hold for us.

These are not easy times in which we live. Times of transition of such magnitude never are. But they are fulfilling, promising times. For we are assured that we are living in the time of new birth, and our world holds out before us all of the potential that comes with new life, when that new life is contemplated as part of God's promise. We are assured that the fulness of that new life is ours, and we are encouraged to continue forward, confident that our Christ is with us, in the struggle to give birth, and in the new life that is so filled with the promise of faith and belief. Thanks be to God! Amen.