

**Sermon preached at St George's Malvern
Pentecost 25B/OS 33
15 November 2015
by Fr John W Stewart**

Readings for the day

Daniel 12.1-3

Hebrews 10.11-14, 19-25

Mark 13.1-11

*"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
In accents most forlorn,
Outside the church, ere Mass began,
One frosty Sunday morn.*

*The congregation stood about,
Coat-collars to the ears,
And talked of stock, and crops, and drought,
As it had done for years.*

*"It's lookin' crook," said Daniel Croke;
"Bedad, it's cruke, me lad,
For never since the banks went broke
Has seasons been so bad."*

*"It's dry, all right," said young O'Neil,
With which astute remark
He squatted down upon his heel
And chewed a piece of bark.*

*And so around the chorus ran
"It's keepin' dry, no doubt."
"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"Before the year is out.*

*"The crops are done; ye'll have your work
To save one bag of grain;
From here way out to Back-o'-Bourke
They're singin' out for rain.*

*"They're singin' out for rain," he said,
"And all the tanks are dry."
The congregation scratched its head,
And gazed around the sky.*

*"There won't be grass, in any case,
Enough to feed an ass;
There's not a blade on Casey's place*

As I came down to Mass."

*"If rain don't come this month," said Dan,
And cleared his throat to speak--
"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"If rain don't come this week."*

*A heavy silence seemed to steal
On all at this remark;
And each man squatted on his heel,
And chewed a piece of bark.*

*"We want a inch of rain, we do,"
O'Neil observed at last;
But Croke "maintained" we wanted two
To put the danger past.*

*"If we don't get three inches, man,
Or four to break this drought,
We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"Before the year is out."*

*In God's good time down came the rain;
And all the afternoon
On iron roof and window-pane
It drummed a homely tune.*

*And through the night it pattered still,
And lightsome, gladsome elves
On dripping spout and window-sill
Kept talking to themselves.*

*It pelted, pelted all day long,
A-singing at its work,
Till every heart took up the song
Way out to Back-o'Bourke.*

*And every creek a banker ran,
And dams filled o'ertop;
"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"If this rain doesn't stop."*

*And stop it did, in God's good time;
And spring came in to fold
A mantle o'er the hills sublime
Of green and pink and gold.*

*And days went by on dancing feet,
With harvest-hopes immense,
And laughing eyes beheld the wheat
Nid-nodding o'er the fence.*

*And, oh, the smiles on every face,
As happy lad and lass
Through grass knee-deep on Casey's place
Went riding down to Mass.*

*While round the church in clothes genteel
Discoursed the men of mark,
And each man squatted on his heel,
And chewed his piece of bark.*

*"There'll be bush-fires for sure, me man,
There will, without a doubt;
We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"Before the year is out."*

John O'Brien (1878-1952)

If Hanrahan were alive now he would find plenty of things to urge him to say "we'll all be rooned". I think there is a bit of Hanrahan in all of us, especially when we think about current events around the world. As we know, there are lots of Hanrahans about – some of them are journalists and political commentators, some of them are elected political representatives, some of them are leaders and pastors of churches. There is no shortage of prophets of doom.

Several years ago one Christian pastor preached that the destructive cyclone across Queensland was God's punishment because the government had changed the abortion laws. Before that, there were many views about why God caused the Indonesian tsunami, the earthquake, the bush fire, the flood, the rise of violence in the Middle East – and on and on.

And we turn up this morning and lo and behold we have Jesus himself saying his version of "we'll all be rooned". Passages like this gospel passage fuel the preaching of those who concentrate on the end of the world – those who draw on evidence of wars and natural disasters and texts like this one to tell us that the end of the world is near and we are all at risk of annihilation.

But actually that's not what Jesus is on about at all – it is in fact an abuse of his teaching. Our starting point is to understand that this is a technical piece of writing. It is called apocalyptic writing and we had another example of it in the first reading from the book of Daniel. Here is Jesus talking about God's plan for humanity. He says there will be a moment of reckoning and judgment at the end of time, and in the meantime he is discussing how we are to live in between time. The word "apocalypse" means "unveiling". Many themes are unveiled or exposed in this passage, so I am choosing only one of them: the nature of violence. It is common for violence to be justified on religious or historical grounds – taking up arms or

resisting force is often argued as essential because of certain factors seen to be threatening. The problem is that violence incites more violence and becomes an escalating spiral. We have spent most of our lives watching the cycles of violence in Israel and Palestine. Not to mention at present Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and many of the African countries. The downing of the Russian plane over Egypt last weekend. And yesterday the news of the latest shocking acts of violence in Paris.

We lament, we weep with all those who suffer and we cry out for an end to this madness – we long for peace. And mostly we feel absolutely helpless. And texts like today's serve to unveil the nature of violence and its consequences.

Jesus begins with the prophecy about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It actually happened in 70CE. It was absolutely catastrophic for the Jewish people because it brought to end their religious practices centred on the Temple – the place where they literally believed God dwelt. The Temple was God's address. Now what are we to do? Out of that catastrophe, that violent action, God brought a completely new way for people to relate to God. Jesus teaches that God now resides in the hearts of people and each of us is a living stone making up the living temple.

Then the disciples link that event with the end of all things. Jesus does not make that link, and he does not reply to their question. Rather, he begins to give instructions about how they, and we, are to live in the period inaugurated by his death. That event, as we know looked like a triumph for the forces of evil in putting the son of God to death. But no, the power of the love of God proves to be much stronger than the power of evil – and love raises Jesus to new life.

He says: pay no attention to people who come claiming to be the Messiah, or some sort of Saviour, leading people astray. He says his coming will NOT be like that. Do not be alarmed by the wars, battles and portents which are to come. That is to say, we must not pay attention to the possible theological value of the prophets who come, and we must avoid thinking God is causing violent events in the world for a particular purpose. Of course, these things are going to happen, as they work against the values of the kingdom Jesus has inaugurated.

So disciples must walk with care. This is the reality we have to live in, and also the world in which we have to give witness to our faith in Jesus in spite of all that tempts us away from our faith. The good news of God about a kingdom not based on violence but love for all will come slowly and quietly. And will always have opposition and challenge.

The things that happen in nature are not caused by God – they are not God intervening to cause destruction or teach us lessons or bring us to our senses. And violence is never caused by God either - Human beings are perfectly capable as we know of gross violence against one another – but it is never the work of God. Violence is ours alone.

So the invitation for us on this most challenging day is to maintain our hope. These terrible things will continue to happen. Yet there is encouragement for us in the second reading we had this morning, from Hebrews 10, 23 : "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."

Dear Hanrahan could only say that we are all going to be rooned. He is a pessimist, a glass half empty person, with a very bleak and hopeless view of things.

Jesus holds a very different view. He holds out a hope which he invites us to embrace. A hope of a world where God's love will prevail, where violence will end, and where all peoples will live together in peace, acceptance and inclusion. That is what we must continue to give ourselves to.

Overnight the Church in England has commended this prayer to us, in the light of the killings in Paris:

Compassionate God and Father of all
we are horrified at violence
in so many parts of the world.
It seems that none are safe
and some are terrified.
Hold back the hands that kill and maim
and turn around the hearts that hate.
Grant instead your strong Spirit of Peace –
Peace that passes our understanding
but changes lives.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.