

# BIRTH PANGS

All this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. Mt 24:8

There is much apocalyptic writing about the end times in this Season of the Cross, in readings last week, today and culminating in powerful words of Jesus' return next week on the feast of the Cross of Varak. The connection between the cross and the end times are in our language, we use the same word *nshan(k)*, to refer to them both. The connection between the cross and the end of human history is deeper and more visceral than just words, however, there is pain and sacrifice associated with both. For just as the Son of man experienced excruciating suffering in his final days, the Old & New Testaments predict the same for humankind in our final days. Jesus says there will be great suffering and injustice, wars between peoples, disease and disasters preceding the coming of the kingdom. Are these the times we live in now? We are just emerging from a global pandemic and are told to expect more. Our poor stewardship of God's Earth contributes to natural disasters of great scale. Old territorial disputes and cold wars are becoming hot. Politics in this and many other countries reveal profound divisions between people about cultural norms, moral values, even about what is true and false. And just imagine if we lived in Armenia, where this Wednesday's celebration of 31 years of Independence, is overshadowed by bombing of civilians, the ever present threat of war, and division from within.

I can understand why some people say that this can't go on any longer, the end is near. Maybe these are the final days that Jesus spoke about? I think they are; but not because I have special insight (Jesus said no one knows this) and not because these days are-on the whole-any more sinful than other days. I believe these are the end days, because I believe the Bible isn't just true for one time, but for all times. God's word rings true at all times whether you happen to live in 122AD, 1022AD or 2022AD. And in all of the readings of this season of the cross, Jesus is raising his voice saying his Father's good creation has been tainted with suffering, injustice, division and disaster. We cannot abide by this any longer, it must come to an end soon.

But just as our tendency to lose our way effects all people in all times, so too does our chance to find our way. Jesus gives us this profound hope in the verses right before Matthew's end times reading, where he puts the suffering all around us in perspective, saying 'all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.' That's right, suffering, injustice, division and disaster, whether in our society or whether in our personal lives, these are all like the intense pains of childbirth, which when gotten through, deliver the greatest, most unexpected gifts of abundant life. There was blood on the cross, there will be blood leading to the final days of men. We can't get around the suffering of the world or

the suffering in our personal lives. But with Jesus, we have a way through it, where our suffering is not the end of the road, but the beginning of a new way, to new life.

This way from suffering to salvation sounds good of course, but like many things in church, it can just remain a lofty and comforting idea that has little to do with daily life. Our church fights against this by dedicating five feasts throughout the year to the cross. These urge us to bring down to Earth, the cross-shaped way from suffering to salvation which Jesus literally brought down to earth. They urge us to see the cross as the most practical and helpful tool of mankind, a daily passageway from suffering into joy.

How does it work? Well the cross reminds us of what Jesus did with the daily suffering, injustice, divisions and betrayals of his day. Rather than react to violence with revenge, betrayal with an iron fist, sin with condemnation; Jesus instead absorbed them on the cross. And in this way, by bearing evil instead of transmitting it, the cross remains the only proven means of defeating evil in this world. This does not mean we are doormats and don't defend ourselves. It means, to take Armenia as one example, we don't fight terrorism by terrorism, we don't repay civilian bombing by bombing civilians, we don't react to dictators by becoming dictatorial. Instead, we defend ourselves with honor and conviction, always in the firm belief that evil eventually defeats itself, and God's justice prevails. We hold firmly to the cross which is like a great lightning rod for a world charged with sin, dissipating the blood lust of Satan so that more damage not be done.

This way of the cross was not just for Jesus for one time, but for all his followers at all times. It can work very powerfully and practically against the evil in our society. In this country, during this mid-term election season, each side tries to demonize the other and entices you to pick a side. Followers of the way do not react, do not join either crusade, but rather absorb anger, distrust and judgement and try to speak truth with love. When someone at work or home disrespects you by doing things behind your back or making you look bad to others, followers of the way do not react by knocking down the wrong-doer in return, but disarm the person and situation by reacting with forgiveness and prayer.

Suffering, injustice, division and disaster-between us and within us-has always been and always will be. Yet, we should not be passive in the face of evil. We cannot abide by it any longer, it must soon come to an end. For though the problems of sin and suffering has always been with us, the solution has been found and is greater still. The solution is the way of the cross, the way which absorbs and disarms suffering and evil. By this way we will find that all our suffering is merely the birth pangs of a renewed creation-around us and within us-whose glory begins now but remains always, unto the ages of ages, amen.