

All will be well Luke 21:5-19

'It will be alright on the night', 'It will be ok when it's finished'. Those two comments have been very much a theme for me for this week. Obviously appropriate for someone organising a week-long children's event, and having their kitchen done. Well I'm sure that it will be alright on at least some of the days, and that regaining an oven and a washing machine will be a cause of celebration..... when it happens.

Last Sunday Paul was talking about Christian hope and that really is the theme of this week's readings as well. Although a superficial reading will hardly confirm that. 'The refiner's fire will leave nothing', says Malachi, 'You will be kept waiting through dangerous and testing times', Jesus tells us via Luke. And now I expect you to believe me when I say that these are messages of hope?

Yes, I do.

Because after the warnings about war, earthquakes, famine and family feuds Jesus concludes, 'Not a hair of your head will perish'. But we can't get away from the message that it won't be easy.

I have a very strong memory of being with a group on the Mount of Olives and in my ill-disciplined way probably paying too little attention to our leader and too much to what else was going on. The American group just in front of us were listening intently to their leader. 'It is easy', she said, 'to be a Christian in the Holy Land'. Now that was not the impression that I had formed. At a number of the sites we had visited the groups tasked with looking after them had seemed too grateful for us visiting, and for the money we had

spent in their gift shops, as though they were really struggling to keep going. Our Christian guide had pretended to be asleep on the coach as we came back into Jerusalem through the infamous wall, as a protection from being refused entry, because he lived on the 'wrong' side. None of that felt easy. I have to conclude that the American meant that when in a group it is easy to behave as the group behaves. It is easy to be a pilgrim in a pilgrim party.

What about the pilgrim in John Bunyan's book *The Pilgrim's progress*? He endures all sorts of wonderfully named trials, Giant Despair, Doubting Castle as well as distracting people before finally he, Christian, and Hopeful swim the river that leads to the heavenly city. His single-minded refusal to be distracted is the main theme of the book in which despite the difficulties and temptations he remains steadfast. But the key is in the names that Bunyan has given his characters – Christian and Hopeful.

Today, of course, is Remembrance Sunday, when as a nation we remember all those who have sacrificed their lives for the freedom of others. And that includes not only those who have died, but others who through mental or physical injury have sacrificed their ability to lead the life they would want. These are the people who have kept going in adversity often when there seemed little chance of success because there was still hope that at the end of this dark road there would be light, and a free future.

Both biblical and modern history are full of conflict between and within nations, of family squabbles that get out of proportion, of natural disasters and above all of trials and tribulations preventing

people settling down to a peaceful life. A quick read of a newspaper today will tell us that nothing has changed.

As you know a group of us regularly tell Bible stories to primary school children. We use a Bible written specifically for that age group and with a strong emphasis on telling the story. As we go through the stories there is a theme of 'heroic' behaviour, of people who dared to be different, Noah, Daniel, John the Baptist, the leaders of the early Christian Church. They stuck to their belief in God, in Jesus, even when the neighbours were laughing or the authorities had them in prison. In modern Britain there is no likelihood of being thrown into a den of lions – but there are still times when it can be hard to stick out from the crowd. It may be easy to be a pilgrim in a pilgrim party, but it can be hard to be the only one in a group of friends supporting migrants or defending food bank clients. The Holy Spirit will be with us as we negotiate these difficulties.

Today's Gospel reading reminds us that even though it will be tough to stand by our beliefs, at times it will be painful, but we will find the words to use to state our case, and we will not be harmed. We should go about our business with hope or to quote St Julian of Norwich:

All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.