Hannah's story is told at a turbulent time at the end of the period of the Judges when people had lost sight of a collective vision, when the Bible tells us “each did what they thought was right in their own eyes.” In time, Hannah's child, Samuel, will be the one who will anoint King David, the first monarch, reflecting a yearning for stability and reconnection with Spirit.

Turbulent Times! Wars and rumours of wars. False prophets. News of the end times. The writer of Mark’s gospel also lived in turbulent times and his readers sought to make sense of the destruction of Jerusalem and the calls to join the wars that raged around them.

Turbulent times! Yesterday many of us were horrified to hear about the appalling attack on Paris, presumably inspired and orchestrated by ISIL. As residents of a global, western city we can relate to the horror of violence, which is usually far away from our shores, erupting in our midst. Yesterday afternoon Sydney people, gathered in Martin Place to lament the violence and pray for Paris. Martin Place, where nearly a year ago, random violence disturbed our peace and took the lives of two hostages and the perpetrator.

Yesterday morning, I turned on the television News. I also looked at Facebook for news of Georgia, a young woman who grew up in St Andrew's on The Terrace in Wellington, whose parents Lynne and Ben, joined us last weekend for worship at Pitt Street. Georgia now lives in Paris with her boyfriend Clément. They live close to the scenes of carnage but through Facebook we thankfully found out they were at home and safe.

It was also through social media that I learned that the day before there had been a terrible suicide bombing in Beirut, Lebanon. But until it was seen through the lens of what was happening in Paris, Beirut was almost invisible to Western eyes. These things happen all the time in the Middle East. The violent disruption of their world has become normalised for us. On Friday our time, 43 were killed in Lebanon, and 240 injured. Most of us didn’t notice.

I am glad that the NSW government is standing in solidarity with the people of Paris, but we all know that the flag of Lebanon will not be flown on the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House will not feature the cedar tree of the Lebanese flag surrounded by red and white.

However, this sermon is not about the violence of terrorism. But I felt it important to say again, in this context, on this day, that all life is valuable, and that no one religion or ideology bears all the responsibility for violence. And that the relationship between religion, politics and violence is profoundly complex.

If you want to read about the connections and disconnections between religion and violence, I recommend Karen Armstrong’s most recent book on this topic.

Today I want to focus on a not unrelated theme – one that has captured the imagination of human beings for a very long time, that is the End Times.
The strangest manifestation of interest in the end of history, among fundamentalist Christians, is seen in the Left Behind industry, which focuses on the Rapture.

The Rapture is supposedly when all the Christians will be taken directly up to heaven, meeting Jesus in the clouds. Everyone else will apparently be left here for seven years of tribulation. So these thoughtful people, who know it all, have written out, the details on how to become a Christian, I guess before it is finally too late for the rest of us.

End Times fascination ebbs and flows but there is always someone, or some group, predicting it’s about to happen any minute and drawing on the Bible or other sacred texts to prove their point.

Reading an apocalyptic chapter like the 13th chapter of Mark reminds me of a couple of the Peanuts comic strips starring Charlie Brown:

First, Linus and Charlie Brown are reading a nursery rhyme. Linus, the resident theologian for Peanuts, says, “The way I see it, ‘The cow jumped over the moon’ indicates a rise in farm prices. The part about the dish running away with the spoon must refer to the consumer. Do you agree with me Charlie Brown?” Charlie Brown replies, “I don’t pretend to be a student of prophetic literature.”

In the second strip, Lucy is looking out the window with a worried look on her face. “It sure has been raining a long time,” she says to Linus. “Do you think it’s going to flood the earth again?” Linus says, “No. God promised that wouldn’t happen again and the rainbow is a sign of that.” “That sure takes a load off my mind,” Lucy says. “Sound theology has a way of doing that,” Linus replies. Presumably Linus has moved on from his interpretation of the cow jumping over the moon.

Well, in fact, there are lots of people who have pretended to be students of prophetic literature. And all too often they interpret it with as much sophistication as Linus’ reading of Mother Goose. What we need, the later Linus says, is sound theology. Sound theology does take a load off our minds, but it also puts some responsibilities on our shoulders.

The thirteenth chapter of Mark is a gold mine for people fascinated by the end of the world. It figures prominently in the books by doomsayers, and in sermons by evangelists more interested in the next world than in this one. On the other hand, this chapter is largely ignored by pragmatists, activists, believers in progress, who dismiss preoccupation with the end of the world as a juvenile state of human development or an aberration of unbalanced minds.

This chapter of Mark, known as “the Little Apocalypse,” is unlike anything else in this Gospel of Mark. Even the structure is different. It is a long discourse that strings together many quotes of, or allusions to, Hebrew Bible apocalyptic teachings. It is certainly the longest sustained discourse that Jesus speaks in this Gospel.

We really have no way of knowing how much, if any, of this discourse, was actually grounded in what Jesus taught.

In a very real sense, we can look at this chapter not from the standpoint of Jesus talking about some distant events of the future, but of events which actually did happen after his death.
This chapter begins with Jesus’s remarks about the magnificent temple that Herod had built, which was started in 20 BCE and was probably still under construction in the days of Jesus. The disciples are really impressed by it. Jesus tells them not to be. As we saw last week in the story of the widow’s mite, Jesus was a serious critic of the abuses of Temple religion.

Mark has Jesus predict what he sees ahead for the Temple and Jerusalem - war, famine and destruction. All of which happened in the Roman-Jewish Wars of 66-70 CE, when the temple was destroyed.

So, one does not have to project everything Jesus says here into some far away future for it to make sense. This is one of the critical mistakes that most popular interpreters make when reading these passages. They ignore the original context in which these things were said and written. When we do that, we can make them mean just about anything we wish, like Linus and the nursery rhyme.

This is not to say the passage has nothing to do with the end of time. But what is said is not at all clear and no timetables are given. If you come to these passages expecting some crystal ball vision of the future, you will not find it.

The danger in dealing with such a topic is that people so easily become obsessed with it.

One example of this is the popularity of the Left Behind series (which is not only books, but has also become a series of movies and even video games). Millions of copies have been sold, making the authors multi-millionaires. The books, written for adults but also serialised for children, take bits and pieces of various parts of the Bible and put them together into works of fiction which are now taken as fact by many people.

It seems that interpreting the Book of Revelation - or Mark 13 - is much more appealing than living out the Way of Jesus in the here and now.

When I read and hear some of these people today who are obsessed with the End times, I see very little humility. Twentieth century US ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr once said, “There are some people who claim to know the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell.”

[And actually this quote reminds me of another cartoon, this one a Farside calendar. It’s coffee break in hell. In the background you can see the pits of fire, malevolent devils are on guard, and people are queuing up at an urn holding their mugs. The guy sipping his drink cries out “Oh, man. The coffee’s cold. They thought of everything!”]

The problem with certainty about the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell is that people can so easily be led into either unnecessary fear or unfounded security.

But the other extreme is to dismiss these teachings, which is in truth my natural inclination. But to dismiss them as meaningless may cause us miss their significance.

On reflection, I think the real message here is that Jesus tells us to wait, to watch for opportunities to proclaim and live out the Gospel everywhere and every chance we.

What we are called to do is concentrate on the world around us, on the pain here now, on those who are already “left behind,” reaching out to them with the love and grace of God.
How at odds all this focus on heaven and hell is with Jesus who lived his life with compassion for everyone, who took on the political and religious system that entrenched poverty and violence. How at odds with his words, that far from escaping suffering, his followers would face it also (see verses 9ff of this chapter). The words of Jesus here echo in light of such things, “Take heed,” “Do not believe it,” “The end is not yet.” “These are but the birth pangs.”

I do not know what the future holds. I am wary of anyone who claims to know more than they can know. Jesus seems to be telling us to pay more attention to the present than stand with our heads in cloudy visions of the future. For what’s most important is our being faithful disciples in the present. That, in the end, is the only real way that we can watch and wait and work toward the future. That may also greatly impact and shape the future of the faith.

It is a call to live a life of anticipation, of awareness of the power of God, present and active in the world, in lives lived with a commitment to love and justice, and making sure that we are part of that good energy. It is being satisfied with the knowledge that sacred energy is with us in the here and now working for peace, reconciliation, and wholeness in human and planetary life.

A sure sign that we are on the right path of discipleship is that we are so busy loving God and loving our neighbour that we do not have time to speculate about a far off future. We are too busy trying to work in the present to make it, and the future, better for all God’s children.

For us at Pitt Street, that includes participating in campaigns for Climate Justice. Because if there is a real threat to the well-being and future of the world, it is surely the vulnerability we have created through our mindless and relentless carbon emissions.

Today, I am not sure whether the UN Climate talks will still go ahead in Paris in December, but yesterday I heard political leaders saying they would not be cowered into avoiding addressing the very real possibility of future disaster that not attending to climate change presents.

Whatever does or does not happen in Paris, the global movement of people’s voices and bodies will be a strong living commitment to a just and sustainable future, when we join with millions around the world in the People’s Climate March on November 29, highlighting public concern about climate change.

The Pitt Street Mission and Justice Team, with the support of the Church Council, have committed that 50 of us – that’s about half of us who are here - will be part of that March. Our church will be the venue for a prayer service at noon on the day, just a half hour service. I am a bit horrified too hear that my co-organisers think that there could be 1000 people who will attend – before we walk to St Marys to join the Catholic community, and on down to the Domain.

The Uniting Church at state and national levels is firmly behind participation in the People’s March.

Since its foundation almost 40 years ago, the Uniting Church has repeatedly voiced its concern for the wellbeing of the planet and the rights of future generations to enjoy our natural environment.
So we will join others from many part of Australian society to express our concern for the whole creation. This is also for us an important action we take in solidarity with our Pacific and other international partner churches.

The Uniting Church declared climate change a serious threat to the future of life on earth in 2006, and in the years since, most national and state councils of the Church have divested from corporations engaging in fossil fuel extraction.

National Director of UnitingJustice Australia, Rev. Elenie Poulos, urged the Australian Government to lift its commitment to global efforts to address climate change.

She has said, "Australia’s announced emissions reduction target of 26-28% below 2005 levels by 2030, remains well short of the level experts say is required to reverse the effects of climate change."

She went on to say: “there’s still time for the Australian Government to put a more ambitious target on the table in Paris, and we should be doing what we can to encourage our Government to aim higher.”

UnitingWorld National Director Rob Floyd has said that partner churches across the Pacific welcome the support for a stronger global response.

“The message to the world by Pacific leaders is clear. It is our responsibility as stewards and custodians of the earth to respond responsibly and ethically.”

“Small island states are already suffering the impacts of climate change and we need a concerted international response to address this very real threat to humanity.”

This seems to me to be kind the kind of future focus that Christians should be engaging in, rather than worrying about what will happen to the passengers of a jet piloted by a born-again Christian who will be taken up at the time of the rapture. (I kid you not, this is a serious question for fans of rapture ideology).

To make momentous change happen, or to stand firm in tumultuous times, requires faith that God works in and through history in partnership with creation.

To persevere for movements of justice for the expendable people of the world, or to work for a new kind of justice, requires more than optimism.

It asks, not for faith in human systems, but rather faith in the God who reverses old injustices and brings new life. Faith in the capacity of God’s human creatures to live peacefully and creatively on earth.

And a commitment to join with the Spirit of Life in turning our world around.