

On the night of July 18 in the year 64 A.D. a fire broke out in Rome. It raged for a week and destroyed most of the city. The people revolted against the Emperor Nero. Nero, in turn, placed the blame for the fire on a newfound society of people who called themselves Christians. Christians were arrested, hauled into the public arena, tortured, and killed. The persecution eventually reached the two great leaders of the early Church, Peter and Paul. Legend says they embraced each other on the Ostian Way on June 29, 67 A.D. Paul was beheaded; Peter was crucified and buried at the foot of the Vatican hill.

It was terrifying to be a Christian living in Rome in the late 60's. Any Christian could look around and see their leaders, their friends, and members of their families put to brutal death before the public. They all had to ask themselves a piercing question: "Is it worth it? Is it really worth believing that Jesus is the Son of God if the emperor will kill me for it?"

It's very likely that the Gospel of Mark was written and published for the first time in Rome in the late 60's. Chapter 13, which we hear from today, was probably added when the persecution was spreading. People remembered that Jesus predicted trials of every sort. As the Gospel circulated people heard that in spite of that prediction, Jesus also promised that the Son of Man would come in glory to assemble his chosen from the four winds, from the farthest bounds of earth and sky. Is it worth it to remain a Christian? Yes, the Gospel said. Yes, it's worth it.

Today persecution is much more subtle. Gov. Ashcroft does not order Christians into Arrowhead Stadium to be impaled and set on fire as halftime entertainment. But we all have neighbors who don't go to church. On our way down James A. Reed we know they're relaxing all weekend, and we begin to wonder, "Is this really worth it?" We all have co-workers who tell ethnic jokes. We'd like to stop them, but everybody laughs, so we begin to wonder, "Is it worth it?" A high school student believes that sex outside of marriage is wrong. But all her friends talk about it, so she begins to wonder, "Is it worth it?" Missionaries in El Salvador just want to preach the Gospel, but everytime a co-worker is killed by terrorists, they begin to wonder, "Is it worth it?"

Remember Mark 13. Jesus predicted there would be trials of every sort, but he also promised that the Son of Man would come in glory to assemble his chosen. Yes, the Gospel says. Yes, it's worth it.