

## **Mark 13:24 – 37**

Today is the beginning of an Advent season unlike any other we have experienced. No parties, no crowded shopping centres, no Christmas markets. We face further strict restrictions on where we can go, what we can do and whom we can visit, and somehow at this time of year the feelings of yearning to see those we love become more intense. It's hard to make any plans, and the future is uncertain. Still, we can always rely on the Sunday lectionary to make us feel better, and today we bring you the End of the World (according to Mark).

The Gospel reading we heard this morning is the second half of an apocalyptic discourse by Jesus. In the previous chapter Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, and he is teaching every day in the Temple. He challenges the Temple authorities, and characterises the Temple under their leadership as "a den of robbers", as he drives out the traders and moneychangers.

When his disciples admire the Temple building, Herod the Great's immense vanity project, Jesus foretells its complete destruction. There will be war, he says, "nation will rise up against nation", and the people of Judea will flee to the hills. There will be a time of persecution for Jesus' disciples. In today's reading, nature itself is in turmoil, with signs in the sky: the sun and moon darkened, the stars falling. These are all signs, Jesus tells them, of the coming of the Son on Man, the kingdom of God. Quoting from the book of Daniel, he says 'they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with power and glory.'

This is apocalyptic writing. An apocalypse reveals something about the ultimate divine purpose. It is a prophetic revelation, and often describes a cataclysm in which the forces of good permanently triumph over the forces of evil. Theologian Alyce McKenzie says that "it is a genre intended for persecuted groups that assures them, in vivid code language, of their imminent vindication through dramatic divine intervention."<sup>1</sup> It is a story for people in crisis, people who want to cry out "Do something, God!", or, in the words of Isaiah, "O that you would tear the heavens and come down." Apocalyptic writings appear at many places in the Hebrew Bible, always when the nation is in crisis: passages in Isaiah responding to the Assyrian invasion, those in Daniel to religious persecution under the Seleucid Empire.

Mark's Gospel was written very soon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Following an abortive Jewish rebellion, a Roman army first besieged the city and then sacked it, destroying the Temple and killing many thousands of people, with many more being carried off into slavery. The destruction of the Temple represents a catastrophe of mythic proportions. The Temple was not only a centre of religious, political and economic life, but also the place where God's presence appeared, the earthly dwelling place of God. Mark, speaking in the voice of Jesus to the church of the late first century, is reaching deeply into the mythic resources of a tradition in order to invoke divine transcendence in the face of such a disaster.

For people like us, in countries where most live relatively peaceful and comfortable lives, apocalyptic texts may seem both strange and irrelevant. In 'normal' times (remember those?) Advent does not have much sense of urgency. "The Son of Man is coming, you say? I thought it was just the countdown of shopping days till Christmas."<sup>2</sup> However times are far from 'normal', and perhaps this Advent the apocalyptic vision might seem a little more real to us! What the vision tells us is that even in the worst of times God's salvation is here with us, his kingdom is very near, if we read the signs.

In the Gospel reading Jesus is speaking at one and the same time about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the End Time when the Son of Man will appear, and the events that were shortly to follow in his own life. As he instructs the disciples to be vigilant, and to keep awake, he tells us that the Son of Man may appear "in the evening or at midnight, or at cock crow, or at dawn." These words take us into the next and final chapters of the story, prefiguring the last supper, his arrest, Peter's denial, his trial and crucifixion. The apocalyptic sign of the cross is present in this Advent season, even as we wait for the coming of the baby born in Bethlehem.

The point is that "God is the kind of God who breaks into our world: creating, liberating, healing, raising from the dead and saving."<sup>3</sup> That is God's covenant, his commitment to the world and to his people, that continues today and throughout all of time. It is the meaning of the incarnation. 'Each time we recognise that salvation appearing, it resonates with Jesus' birth, death and resurrection.' And that commitment demands our response.

In her book *The Meaning is in the Waiting*, Paula Gooder argues that the end time is the next great cycle of salvation history, the kingdom of God instituted by Jesus, but not yet fully realised in the world. She says this:

The biblical vision of waiting for the future is one that calls forth both an acceptance of the reality of our current situation and a determination to change it. We live 'between' and so must accept the nature of the world as it is now, but we can also grasp hold of God's possibility for the world. The glimmers of God's glory that we see exist to strengthen our resolve to increase those glimmers, to strive to make God's kingdom more present on earth every day. Waiting for the future involves a recognition of what the world might be, and the resolve to bring our own part of it one step closer. ... waiting becomes active; waiting for the future involves transforming the present.<sup>4</sup>

Before it became a time for office parties and shopping, Advent, like Lent, was traditionally a time for penitence, fasting and reflection. So maybe this year when jolly preparations and celebrations are severely curtailed, we could use the opportunity to reflect on our lives. We can ask what unrealized dreams of community and spiritual growth still draw us forward, and examine our conscience to ask where we are complicit in the injustice and suffering of

the world, and the damage being done to God's creation. This is not to make ourselves miserable, but to listen to the voice of possibility in our lives, and try to see God's vision of how and where we are called to work with him to heal the earth. However helpless we feel, however limited our lives are at the moment, there is always something we can do, as individuals, as a church, in work, in giving and in prayer, right now. As we journey through Advent we will hear again the words of the prophets telling of a future salvation, of John the Baptist speaking about the One who was coming, of a young woman who received a strange and frightening message, and yet said "Yes" to God; and we can look for those glimmers of God's glory that give us hope, and strengthen our resolve to "strive to make God's kingdom more present on earth every day."

1. Alyce McKenzie (2010) "Get Over Yourself! Luke 21:5-19" [Online]. Available at <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2010/11/get-over-yourself> (Accessed 27/11/2020).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Paula Gooder (2008) "The Meaning is in the Waiting". Norwich: Canterbury press
4. *Ibid*, p.15