

SERMON FOR ADVENT SUNDAY – YEAR B

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Almighty God, we thank you for your holy word. May it be a lantern to our feet, a light to our paths, and strength to our lives, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As a new church year begins today, if we look at our world today, we might be forgiven for thinking that we are in the midst of an apocalyptic time. A global pandemic, severe economic downturn and global political turmoil. I might seem as though we have entered a world of which Jesus speaks of in today's gospel reading.

We don't start our new year, which is Year B in our three-year cycle at the beginning of our gospel for this year, Mark, but rather we start towards the end, chapter 13, which may seem a strange thing to do, but it actually it is a helpful way to re-introduce ourselves to this gospel. And this is because chapter 13 of Mark gives us some hints for grasping the events in the world of the time that shaped the second gospel. Although we don't know where Mark was written, it is clear that it was written for a congregation of non-Jewish, Greek-speaking Christians, sometime between 70 and 80AD. Mark's gospel was written around the time of the Jewish revolt against Rome which ended with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70AD, and it has been suggested that Mark is urging his community not to take part in the rebel's revolt.

Believers were being arrested and persecuted by the secular authorities and were even being betrayed by family members for their new faith. Also, it seems as though there were people coming in Jesus' name or even claiming to be Jesus returned from heaven, and leading the faithful astray. Some scholars seem to think that these false leaders may have been claiming that the end of the world had already arrived or claimed to know when it would happen, and so Jesus states clearly in Mark's gospel that no one: not even Jesus himself, knows when the end will come and he will return.

The Gospel lessons for the First Sunday in Advent in all three years centre on the belief that Christ would return imminently. And part of the reading for each year comes from what is known as the 'Little Apocalypse'. The cosmic happenings depicted in Mark's 'Little Apocalypse' are based on images from the Old Testament book of Daniel. Given the hardships that Mark's community were experiencing, their hope was that their suffering was not God punishing them, but was actually as a result of their faithfulness to God, and that the time would come when their loyalty would be repaid and those who had persecuted them would receive their just desserts from God.

Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." It's clear that the early Christian church expected Jesus' return in their lifetimes. St Paul did in his letters. This hope would have been important as they experienced persecution for their faith. The problem for the early Christians was that people within their community started dying, before Jesus had returned. But why? Was it because they had not been worthy, or had Jesus, or perhaps Mark been wrong? It becomes clear in later Christian writings that Jesus' return had been delayed, and the belief in Jesus' imminent return was tempered somewhat, but that he was still expected to return to be judge of the earth and reward the faithful with eternal life.

But then Jesus makes a promise. All is not lost. Jesus promises that his Word will not pass away. Yet despite this promise Jesus warns the disciples to "Beware, keep alert". I would suggest that part of this warning is not only to await Jesus' return, which may still happen at any time, but also to beware and keep alert for the world we live in. And just like the early Christians, we live in a world today which seeks, perhaps a bit more subduedly these days, to push people of faith off the path of following God. And we see how easy it is to fit into the way of acting and thinking of the world and to be taken off the path of faith by the world's empty promises.

And so what Jesus asks of his disciples is patience, to wait, but to wait as those with hope. As we wait in hope in our own time: wait for a vaccine and wait for life to return to some sort of normality, I sometimes wonder if this year may in some way help us to recognise that we don't have all the answers as humans and that we need to return to simpler and slower way of life.

It would be perhaps easier to join in with Isaiah, to hope that God will stop sleeping, come down from heaven and fix the world – right now! Our own prayer may have been very similar to Isaiah. Bring an end to the pandemic. Protect the most vulnerable in our communities. Support our frontline healthcare workers. Oh, and save the world! Now! "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

While I believe we should still be praying for these things, and more, we need to also wrestle with the hard to accept way the world often is: messy and full of infuriating contradictions.

And we wait, struggling with God's apparent absence at times. But we still wait and pray as those who have hope. Hope that better times lay ahead. Hope that God is always with us. The hope that is born at Christmas.