

1st Sunday of Advent 2023. Mark 13:24-37 Hope

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and the word means 'coming' or 'arrival'. Despite the busy time of year, Advent is actually a time for slowing down and patient watchfulness, to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom, first in our hearts through an infant saviour, and then in joyful anticipation of his coming in glory like a Bridegroom to his Bride.

Each week we will light an Advent candle in the Advent wreath. These candles represent hope, peace, joy, and love. It is a penitential time of year, and hope, peace and joy are the fruit of Grace stemming from repentance, all culminating in God's great act of love for us and for the whole world at Christmas.

The gospel reading for today may seem a strange place to start in this watching and waiting, yet I think it shows the full scope of this God for whom we watch and wait, filled with joyous hope.

To put the reading in context: the start of ch.13 of Mark shows the disciples being amazed by the scale and beauty of the Jerusalem temple. "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (v.1). Jesus' response is to teach about the temple's coming destruction (v.2). A "desolating sacrilege" will profane the temple along with many tribulations, including false messiahs and false prophets (13:14-23).

The gospel of Mark, more than any other, asks the question, 'Where do we find God?' Jesus is saying that the temple will no longer be the location of God. Where do we find God now, then?

The answer, of course, is not in the glorious temple but on the cross. Not in the city proper but outside the city walls. Not in the centre of power and authority but in the wilderness. So as we start this watching and waiting, we might ask, 'Where will we look for God this Advent season?'

At the same time, where you find God might depend on what you are looking for. Jesus warns his disciples to be watchful for those who would look to false Messiahs and false prophets who are capable of the same works as he (13:21-22). This is not unlike the description of the second beast in Revelation 13, who is also able to perform signs, to do "messiah-like" things.

Now that could be a problem. That which is false, which could lead us astray, can all too often have an appearance of what is good. Going into these last chapters of Jesus' story of his earthly ministry, the disciples need a reality check, and so do we. Jesus' commands to "be alert" (v.23), "keep awake" (v. 37), are more than just stating that God's time is not our time.

It is to be watchful and discerning, especially when chaos abounds. To keep awake and be alert means we need to know what we are looking for.

We need to understand the great glory, wonder, and majesty of the incarnation, which is imparted to us by God the Holy Spirit alone and not human wisdom. That the King of Kings, the eternal Son of God, comes to us as a new-born baby.

Now if God becomes human, it becomes quite easy to make God like us; to look for God in human ways and human forms; to hold God to our standards. We are to be alert and filter all things through the cross.

Yet at the heart of such an apocalyptic passage is encouragement and hope. In a way, this is Jesus at his pastoral best. That which looks like devastation and defeat will be God's victory.

Out of the destruction of the temple will be a new presence of God. Out of the suffering and death of their Messiah will be new life. God's new way of being in the world will turn a cross into resurrection and a baby in a manger into salvation for the world.

So where do we find God?

Mark more than any other gospel, links the baptism and the crucifixion of Jesus. On both occasions he uses a word to describe heaven and earth being torn apart. The verb is *schizo* in the Greek. Utterly torn asunder. At the beginning of his earthly ministry, his baptism, heaven is *schizo'd* by God declaring, "Here is my son."

And at the end of it, the instant Jesus exhaled for the last time on the cross, the temple curtain was *schizo'd*, never to be used to separate God and his children again. This tearing apart of the curtain means that all that separates us from God has been torn asunder and can never go back to the way it was before.

Jesus has *schizo'd* everything. God is no longer in a building and there is no keeping God at a distance anymore. God is not and will not be where we expect to find God, yet we watch and wait, and he comes to us.

For we find God in Jesus.

There is a certain realness in this Gospel text to begin the Advent season. It cuts through any sentimentality and romanticism about Christmas and reminds us that this incarnation is a serious business. The darkening of the sun, the dimming of the moon's light, and the stars falling from heaven means the end of the world as we have known it.

Death will be no more, because this little baby we wait for is God the Son, who will die to bring all these things to pass; the beginning middle and end all at once. This is truly something to ponder and watch and wait for.

Not to be a Scrooge or Grinch this Christmas, but to marvel at our Lord God Almighty; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is never taken by surprise and has all things in hand for those who love him. Jesus promises elsewhere when all these things happen, 'not a hair on you head will perish' (Luke 12:18).

Only the Father knows the time of the coming of the Son of Man. We wait with great boldness and hope because God himself is the ultimate watchful one. He is constantly watching out for us.

Knowing that, we are enabled in how to wait by God.

And Jesus comes. He comes to be born in our hearts afresh at Christmas, and he comes to us every day of our lives, and will come again, the Lion of Judah, in great glory with the host of heaven to bring about the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God.

Hope can be defined perhaps as our joyous expectation of this! Come Lord Jesus.

This is where the connection between the coming of the Messiah born in Bethlehem and the outpouring of the Son of Man life in Jesus' death and resurrection, lies. The events of Jesus' birth and death are inseparable; we cannot have one without the other.

This is the story of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. This is the Advent message amidst the clutter of our time.

Hear the closing promise of Jesus in light of all that has been said in this marvellous Advent text; "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away, ... and what I say to you I say to all: keep awake" (vv.31, 37). Let me pray...