



Sunday 3rd December 2023

The First Sunday of Advent

Gospel Reading

Mark 13.24-37

²⁴ “But in those days, following that distress,

“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

²⁶ “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸ “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

The Day and Hour Unknown

³² “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

Other Readings: Isaiah 64.1-9 Psalm 80.1-8,18-20 1 Corinthians 1.3-9

Homily

So here we are! It is the start of Advent. We have lit the first candle in our Advent ring as a sign that Christmas is on its way. But there have already been other signs that Christmas is coming, like the adverts on TV, the gifts in the shops and the decorations popping up outside people’s houses. In our Gospel reading today, Mark quotes Jesus talking about signs; using the sort of images that Old Testament prophets like Isaiah used when talking about God’s judgement of the nations. It was language and imagery that was familiar in those days for indicating social and

political upheavals. It may all sound very gloomy or even frightening, but the purpose of these signs is not to frighten us but to encourage us.

Jesus had just been predicting events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, something that would take place about 30 years after his death and resurrection. But now he is looking further ahead to a time of large-scale unrest and turmoil in the world that would end with God's judgement of the nations and his own return to earth, not as a helpless human baby but in power and glory to complete the work he had started and establish the kingdom of God on earth. He talks about the return of the Son of Man using an Old Testament phrase which is often used to denote someone sent by God at the end of the age. We only have to watch the news to know that there is a lot wrong with the world and with our own nation, and Advent is a reminder, not just about Christmas but also that Christ the King *will* return to establish a reign of justice and peace.

Biblical language about the future has been described by the theologian Tom Wright, in his book 'Surprised by Hope', as 'a set of signposts pointing into a mist'. He explains that 'Signposts don't normally provide you with photographs of what you'll find at the end of the road', but they do point you in the right direction. The time will come, sooner or later, when there will be, to quote Tom Wright again, 'a great renewal of the world' when 'Jesus will personally be present, the dead will be raised, and the living Christians will be transformed'. In this way, the transforming work that God in Jesus began at Easter, will be brought to completion.

It is not easy to accept the reality of this scenario when it is so far removed from our normal experience, but the important thing to grasp, is that God will bring the history of the world to completion, and, whether we are dead or living when Christ returns, we will be with him forever. The best is yet to be.

Now, if we see signs that something is going to happen, and it is going to affect us or involve us, then we need to make sure that we are ready. If we see the rain clouds appearing, we need to make sure we are dressed for wet weather, or get the washing in, or whatever. Jesus used the image of the fig tree to encourage his hearers to be ready, and to have confidence, for whenever these events come to pass and whenever it is that he returns. The fig tree is one of the few deciduous trees in the Middle East, losing its leaves in the winter and growing new ones in the spring, so Jesus said that when you see the first leaves appearing you know that summer is on the way.

When Jesus talked about 'this generation' not passing away before these things come to pass, it is unlikely that he meant he would be coming back during the lifetime of the disciples, but either he was referring to the generation that sees the signs leading up to that event, or he was here referring specifically to his prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. However, Jesus said that even he did not know the time when he would return, only God the Father does.

Finally, Jesus warned and encouraged his hearers to stay alert and be careful how they lived; not to get entangled in wayward pleasures or get bogged down in the anxieties of life, but to live faithfully as people of God and pray for strength to get through times of upheaval.

Conversation Questions

1. The prophet Isaiah (64:1) called out for God to intervene in the affairs of his and the surrounding nations, saying 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down'. What situations in our nation and the world cause you to feel the same?
2. What do Jesus' words mean for you when he said, 'be on guard', 'be alert' and 'keep watch'?
3. Is there anything else from the passage not already discussed that speaks to you? What is it?
4. What will you do this week in your Monday-to-Saturday ministry in response to what you have heard today? #everydayfaith

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer, responding to what you have heard today and listening to what God might be saying to you.

Collect of the day

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;
that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

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