

Advent Begins: A Meditation on Mark 13: 24-37

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As Advent begins and with it our new Church year, God invites us again to the Advent adventure of contemplation and discernment of knowing where God is, and where God is not. This is the glory and the burden of God's people from biblical times to the present: to know the truth that sets us free, to distinguish the real God from the idols we humans prefer. I suggest that the Advent Sunday Gospel from Mark's so-called 'little apocalypse' is best understood in these terms.

It's not a crystal ball or a trip on Dr Who's *Tardis* that we're offered in the Advent Sunday Gospel, revealing the end of everything in advance. Rather, it's about the end of the world as we humans habitually take it to be - the end of a whole mistaken view of life and set of priorities. It's the end of our compulsive construction of meaning on false premises, which occupies every culture and every generation, investing the ordinary ups and downs and events of life with an ultimate value they don't deserve.

Today's anxiety about a new global financial crisis is the latest example, with heroes and villains in the Eurozone, with popular uprisings throughout the West against rapacious CEOs who deserve all the blame, while the system strikes back as if this Occupy movement represents a fundamental crisis demanding immediate suppression, and all this as a new Pacific Century of Sino-American rivalry begins to take shape. Before the global economy got wobbly it was the so-called 'clash of civilizations' after 9/11, with another cast of goodies and baddies, with threatening asylum seekers needing to be locked up in the desert or the middle of the ocean, and a population which had to be 'alert but not alarmed'. Before that came the Cold War, which gave us decades of drama with 'Reds under the bed', with the 'Axis of Evil', and with God anointed as the champion of our Western way of life. And so it went, all the way back to Cain and Abel in the biblical dreamtime.

From political parties locked in the hysteria of manufactured mutual exclusion, with the help of a media hungry for incident, to the beat-ups of the tabloids about who's leaving who for whom, to the adversarial world of reality TV and the endless dysfunctional drama of the Kardashians family, we manufacture incident, division, conflict, violence and scapegoats. And all this so we can be diverted from the boring business of just abiding quietly with those among whom we live and work, enjoying life's deepest pleasures of growing, creating and loving, finding in these simple rhythms and the biblical God who blesses them enough meaning and purpose to be going on with. Instead it's in our sinful natures to create drama, to be transfixed by idols.

That's why, earlier in Mark 13, Jesus warns his disciples that over-inflated causes, manufactured dramas and false messiahs are bound to come, because this is what human culture and religion always deliver-an endless cycle of junk meaning, which is worse for you than junk food, with as little real value. On Advent Sunday, however, in this later portion of Mark 13, we're given the alternative. We're told what to look for so we can recognize what God's really involved in, what God's really like, in contrast with what our baptism liturgy calls 'the empty display and false values of the world'.

The Advent Sunday Gospel contrasts the bogus crises, absolute causes and messianic pretensions of history, in which people regularly invest everything, with the real crisis of this

world. This is what Mark declares, and what Jesus trains us to watch out for. But it's not the darkened sky and cosmic cataclysm you might see in a science-fiction movie. Such standard apocalyptic imagery is certainly used, but it's used metaphorically. If these signs were meant to be taken literally, you could hardly miss them, could you? There'd be no need to watch carefully. There'd be no need for Advent Sunday's low-key image from the garden, of a fig tree beginning to put out shoots that a gardener needs to look out for.

I suggest, rather, that the truest apocalypse is none other than the death of Jesus himself, and the revealing of his resurrection. Why? Because the times Jesus tells us to look out for, when God's decisive action will be revealed, are actually the times of his own betrayal, of his arrest, trial and crucifixion—things which come 'in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn'. I also wonder if the watchers warned about being found asleep in the Advent Sunday Gospel recall Jesus' disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, while the darkening of the sun recalls the events of Good Friday. Perhaps Christ coming on the clouds is an image of the resurrection. Rather than dire astronomical predictions, then, what these images demand is a huge imaginative shakeup. Jesus' Easter Gospel of cross and resurrection shows up our bogus human priorities: our overblown agendas without real importance, and the erroneous identification of God with our favourite obsessions. All this dramatic windbagery is undermined by Jesus, who shows us that God is invested somewhere else entirely.

So, thanks to Jesus, we don't have to live in thrall to the world that's passing away. We don't always have to be right, for instance; we don't always have to be on the inner; we needn't spend our lives making and defending positions, securing our advantage and lining others up for exclusion so we can feel better about ourselves. These are the purely human constructions behind all cultures and religions, so that what we regularly think of as 'God' is actually a creature of our own fevered imagining. But the real God, the God of Jesus Christ and him crucified, is not involved in any of this. All that is human dysfunction and sin; it's not God.