

Advent Sunday 2020

Mark 13:24-37

Today we begin a new year and among other things we mark that new year by listening to a different evangelist. Today we begin to journey with Mark, we'll be listening largely to his gospel throughout this coming year. We begin today with what is often known as the 'little apocalypse.' This is Mark's vision of the beginning of the end.

Unfortunately we have begun our journey with Mark with perhaps *the* most difficult passage in the whole gospel to interpret. Apocalyptic literature is difficult and it is probably the type of writing most frequently misinterpreted. How often do we read about groups predicting the end of the world, how often do groups use the dualism of apocalyptic literature to say you're in, you're out.

Advent is all about beginnings, endings and the present time all rolled into one, this is why today we are reading this passage from Mark, because it is all about what has happened, what is happening and what will happen. It's about the suspension of time. It is like going to the cinema or theatre late in the afternoon and being entranced by a movie or a play. Time stands still and as you reappear into the evening darkness nothing seems quite the same.

The passage from Mark seems to describe the suffering of the cross, and the glory of the resurrection and then there is a sense in which they are recapitulated in our time, these things have happened, but we must watch out because they are not just events in history, they are a new way of living for those swept up in this great narrative, they are happening now, the cross and the resurrection are the very ground of our lives of faith, they will happen in the future. Watch out for the signs. These are events that happened in time but they also transcend it.

But aren't we preparing for the birth of Jesus? You might well ask! Yes we are, but Mark didn't have a tradition of the story of Jesus' birth and infancy unlike Matthew and Luke; Mark opens boldly 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' He spends sixteen chapters telling us what that means. Mark looks forward, his is a breathless account of Jesus' journey to the cross and beyond to the empty tomb.

Mark's gospel by tradition is the story of Peter's journey. Peter, the archetypal hearer of Jesus' message, the typical witness, the one who gets it wrong time after time. It reaches a climax in the arrest scene, Jesus says 'I am' when questioned by the High Priest, are you the messiah the Son of the Blessed one? And at that very moment outside Peter is asked if he is one of Jesus' followers: 'I am not.'

If it is the gospel for Peter it is the gospel for all of us. Our lives of faith, are grounded in cross and resurrection, not as historical events but as the meaning behind our lives and all that we do, as a present reality and as our future. What Jesus did and does has no end, and certainly not in the written pages of a gospel. Because the work he does he is doing in every new reader and every time we listen to Mark's gospel anew. The work of Jesus in the reader is the

end of the gospel. Mark's account finishes inconclusively because we are called to start again, think again, act again.

As we begin again another year, we are reminded both of the passing of time and of the timelessness of God and the story of God's engagement with the creation and with us. Augustine tells us that God made the world 'not in time but with time.' Time is part of creation but God stands beyond the creation and therefore beyond time. 'All transient things are permanent with God' wrote the Anglican divine Thomas Traherne.

One of the themes of TS Eliot's Four Quartets, one of my favourite pieces of poetry, as many of you know, is the triumph over the strait jacket of time. We are reminded to discover the 'still point' at the heart of the dance, the 'unattended moment.' For TS Eliot history is 'a pattern of timeless moments.' For Mark, these moments, are the miracles that Jesus performs during the gospel; these are moments when eternity breaks into time. Jesus knows that those around him will not understand what has occurred until the cross and the empty tomb, hence those enigmatic passages in Mark when those who have seen the wonder of Jesus' healing are told to keep it to themselves.

What does this mean for us? It means that we can and should find eternity in the here and now. It begins here at the altar, where we are once again in the upper room, Jesus is present in our midst with all company of heaven and he feeds us. But more than this we are flung into the future to the wedding feast at the end of time when sacraments will cease and we will be one in unity.

It means that we can and should embrace the ups and downs of life, find in them our own cross and resurrection, be they minor irritations or life changing events. It means that we can and should embrace each other's lives and all they bring. It means we must embrace life and death both our own and those we love with confident hope. Knowing that our lives, lived in time, are nested within the time of God which we call eternity. This is what Advent has traditionally been all about death and judgement, heaven and hell. We shy away from talking about such things, but they are central to Christian living with cross and resurrection at their heart.

But in case you feel that I have downplayed the great festival of the incarnation that we look forward to with such expectancy let me close with a piece of poetry from US Fanthorpe, BC/AD.

...was the moment  
When a few farm workers and three  
members of an obscure Persian sect  
Walked haphazard by starlight straight  
Into the kingdom of heaven  
This was the moment when Before  
Turned into After...

Advent is about turning before into after; may we be ever ready in our lives to do the same. Amen.