

Advent Sunday: What's it to Be?

Sermon for Advent Sunday, Year B, 3 December 2023

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

So, Advent begins, with a new Gospel for a new liturgical year. And today from Mark we have what scholars have called the little apocalypse. Such apocalyptic literature surfaces throughout the Bible to mark the end of an era, perhaps a time when God is no longer reliably present, when things aren't going well, and when we might think that God is punishing us. Yet biblical apocalyptic is different from the more general apocalyptic spirit that's bubbling close to the surface in our world today. It's different because biblical apocalyptic is meant to bring hope and reassurance rather than hopelessness and overreaction.

It's important to realise that today's apocalypses are largely of our own making. There's the climate crisis, which the neoliberal order and the far right will never acknowledge because to do so would discredit their whole world view. Yet people everywhere *feel* this looming threat even if it isn't front of mind.

Likewise, people everywhere have lost the sense of reliable progress that we used to count on in the modern West, and this despite the blind march of so many new technologies. A brand-new iPhone for Christmas maybe, but the AI it relies on might one day rise up to bite the hand that feeds it.

And then there's the dwindling hope of past generations that they could ensure a better future for their children—a hope that's everywhere looking less and less assured. Today's young adults struggle to make the sort of home that their parents could largely take for granted, while those parents watch the bank of mum and dad emptying out. A whole class once used to decent if modest circumstances now sees its security and relative status ebbing away, with many looking for someone to blame.

All this has been called a "polycrisis"—a sort of low-level apocalyptic sensibility. And of course the old standby at times like this is to blame and scapegoat others. Everywhere we see authoritarian populists coming to power. These are experts in the blame game—in Hungary, in Argentina, in Holland, in Israel, and if we're really unlucky we'll see one return in the United States, and this time perhaps for good. The Pope from Argentina, who proclaims the gospel of hope with all its challenges, is cursed by the far right everywhere and especially by the newly-elected Argentinian President, to whom he replies that the world should be wary of such "clown messiahs" as he calls them. And, of course, many children know instinctively that clowns can be sinister figures.

The scapegoating that goes with the blame game is on the rise, too, even here in the lucky country. Having just finished putting its indigenous community back in its place, the great Australian public is now caught up in an apocalyptic panic about dangerous asylum seekers, with both sides of federal politics piling on. As if there aren't lots of people on our side of the fence who've been to jail and who've have done bad things, without needing to lay all the blame at the feet of feared and despised outsiders.

Now, in the face of today's "polycrisis", and these unworthy reactions, what do our readings and our Eucharist have to tell us?

A key thing is that we shouldn't look for someone else to blame, but rather take stock of ourselves. Isaiah today readily admits that our behaviour lies at the root of the loss and confusion and ambiguity that we experience. But even though God might seem absent or withdrawn, Isaiah recalls God's past faithfulness and so can we. Moreover, our Psalm points forward to a new thing that God's doing, in answer to the Psalmist's repeated prayer for restoration—a son of man who's coming, who's anything but a "messianic clown".

And then in our New Testament readings, including our apocalyptic Gospel, we see the Christian difference revealed—the Christian alternative to the world's desperate and violent version of apocalyptic.

Mark couldn't be more explicit today or more reassuring. In the midst of everything going topsy turvy, nevertheless there are clear signs to be read. If God seems hidden, then we're looking in the wrong place. Instead we should look to Jesus Christ, and there we find the hidden God—"veiled in flesh the Godhead see", as we'll be singing shortly at Christmas. And knowing the crucified love of God in Jesus Christ shows us a God who's with us in every agony, every failure, every crisis, acknowledging the pain and confusion, yes, but for all that bringing the promise of Easter. And that's why Mark's Gospel today urges us to keep awake and alert, because Jesus is at work right now and we don't want to miss him—we don't want to let ourselves be distracted and confused, failing to see the signs, and perhaps even going after a "clown messiah" rather than the real one.

Finally, friends, St Paul takes us one step further in our 1 Corinthians reading today. He celebrates the fact that Christians belong to Jesus Christ already. And this is what the sacraments are for, to earth and ground us in this nurturing habitat that is Jesus Christ. Jesus is far more than an individual to whom we reach out or a teacher to whom we might pay attention. Instead, baptism makes us part of his ongoing life, while the Holy Eucharist is nothing less than a living encounter with this living Christ.

The Holy Eucharist isn't like a formal meeting where we go over the minutes of some past meeting—when we gather here, we're not just reading over the minutes of the Last Supper. Instead, this *is* the Last Supper, celebrated in the midst of today's "polycrisis" and offering the world a different way forward. Apart from which we'll have to settle for unrelieved and probably unacknowledged unease, perhaps relying on blaming and scapegoating to lift our spirits, and if all else fails by looking to a "clown messiah" for our salvation. This is why Advent calls on us to be alert and watchful—to avoid those all-too-widespread alternatives. So, friends, what's it to be? The Lord be with you.