

Advent Sunday – 3 December 2023

Gospel Reading (Mark 13. 24-end)

Heaven and earth will pass away, but your words, Lord, will never pass away. May you find us watching and waiting faithfully for you at this blessed time of Advent. Amen.



This year, Advent starts with stark prophetic words from Jesus, borrowed from prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, and Daniel, to signal the second coming of Christ. When the sun is dark, the moon gives no light, the stars fall from the sky, the Son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory.

Far from the incarnation, when the Saviour comes in the helplessness of an infant, the image here is one of ultimate vindication and absolute victory. God has intervened and the return of Jesus will be an amazing event for all his followers.

If you find this apocalyptic language strange and slightly disturbing on this first Sunday of Advent, do not worry, you're not the only one! But sometimes, only such language will do. Sometimes, it's words like these that give people a wake-up call and pulls them up from a state of fear or apathy into a state of hope and action.

When Jesus said those words, he was in Jerusalem. And as he was leaving the Temple, one of his disciples marvelled at the buildings, saying 'Look, Teacher! What massive stones, what magnificent buildings!' And Jesus replied, 'These buildings that you find impressive, they're nothing compared to what is to happen. Every one of them will be thrown down. Not one stone here will be left on another. The end is still to come, and you don't know when. So keep watch.'

Why such strong words? Well, we need to remember what things looked like when the Gospel of Mark was written sometime around the year 70 AD. The listeners of Mark's Gospel at the time were a tiny band of Jesus' followers. Their very lives were at risk because of their faith, and their hopes for the return of the Son of Man – the great Saviour who would finally deliver them from oppression – were dimming daily.

Mark's community was living on the margins. When he wrote his Gospel, there was a great social upheaval in Jerusalem, and it was one of the worst eras of Jewish history. Poverty was on the rise, especially among the Jews, many of whom were becoming destitute. There was a Jewish revolt, violence increased, and crosses started lining the highways from Rome to Jerusalem.

Such were things under the reign of men. But what would they be like under the reign of God?

Under the reign of God, people would be free, through the teachings and miracles of Jesus. All people, whatever their class, gender, race, age, or physical condition, would be received and valued by God and taught to create a new, fair, inclusive community. That's what Christians believed.



In this context, the words of Jesus make total sense: they shake people out of fear and doubt and cast a victorious light on their condition, bringing hope into their lives. We can see how these words – even if they sound apocalyptic – bring good news to those who find themselves in bondage of any kind. They open up possibilities. They remind them that the harshness and darkness of winter is coming to an end, and that the peace and light of summer is on the way. The Son of Man is near, even at the gates.

The people who walked in darkness were going to see a great light indeed.

But what light is on the way for us today? What hopes and possibilities?

It is easy to despair today, when we see the hurt and suffering of those who remain marginalised in our society; those who are discriminated against even in our communities of faith; those who are persecuted for their faith; those who kill each other because of their faith.

It is easy to be discouraged in the face of injustice, inequality, poverty.

And yet, 'Look at the fig tree', says Jesus. We learn from the fig tree, and we see that summer is near; the kingdom is closer than we think. Therefore, we are called to live without fear. We are called to await the Son of Man with hearts full of compassion for those who suffer, and we do so with hope, for he is near, very near. It is this generosity that drives us to do things for others, to send them a message of love in whatever shape of form – a shoe box, a card, a visit, a cup of tea, a hug, a smile!



The Lord is near. And he commands us to keep watch, to be alert.

The command is to be faithful to Christ, to set aside the standards and fashions of the present age, and to keep awake, watching – as Paul says in his First Letter to the Corinthians – and 'eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed'.

But the words of Jesus in our Gospel passage also remind us that the one we are waiting for is not just a baby in a manger, but a man on a mission – with an uncompromising agenda – one that gives the whole world to the meek; one that asks us to give up all that the world tells us is important; one that says there is freedom in focusing on the needs of others, strengthening the weary, comforting the sick, being there to listen and to share.

If we acknowledge his birth, if we lay a stake in his claim that God can burst through and change the world, then that change will begin in us.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but his words will stay with us. They will transform us. Because they ask us to make a change, and the time is now.

Advent, like all other times of the liturgical year, has its own characteristic readings, writings, and music. The season has its own carols of course, and one of the favourites in this country is 'In the Bleak Midwinter'. The English poet Christina Rossetti penned the words around 1872, and when Gustav Holst composed a melody for it in 1906, a new carol was born. Another popular version – my personal favourite – was composed by Harold Darke in 1909, deep and moving, with soaring tenor lines and gorgeous harmonies.

But it is the lyrics of Christina Rossetti what make the carol really precious and meaningful. The carol is both a Christmas carol and an Advent carol, with the words of the second verse echoing the words of Jesus to his apostles:

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When He comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable-place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty,
Jesus Christ.



This is the one for whom we are keeping watch. The one who was, who is and who will be forever. Underlying all life are those things that will not change: His words, His promises, His assurances. They will not pass away. He is God, and God is a sure foundation. He is near, and his Word will never fail us. Keep watch, the signs are all around.