

## **Jesus – His coming, our watchfulness (quotes and thoughts about living through an apocalypse)**

Daniel 12:1-3 & 7:13-14; Mark 13:24-33

Today's Gospel reading is the penultimate part of a kind of farewell speech given by Jesus where he seeks to prepare his disciples for what will follow his death. He delivers his speech as a prophecy couched the language of Jewish apocalyptic.<sup>1</sup>

Translated literally from Greek *apocalypsis* means *un-covering* and refers to a revelation of something hidden or not seen. Jesus uses this kind of language since, whilst to us it is arcane (to say the least), to Jews of his time it had cache as a very credible, albeit a highly symbolic, way to talk about the future.

Yet apocalyptic is not limited solely to the Jewish and, subsequently, our Christian tradition. In general terms it can be thought of as “the literature of the dispossessed. It usually arises [in one form or another] among oppressed or alienated people who have little chance of fighting back against the powerful and of gaining political... [or economic self-determination]. The book of Daniel [from which we heard today] originated in such a Jewish group<sup>2</sup>... Their book presents an interpretation of history... based on the conviction that the God of Israel would fulfil the promises made to his people, and eventually vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked.”<sup>3</sup>

Today's Gospel reading (as we have heard), draws deeply from the Book of Daniel and subsequent elaborations in the intertestamental period.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller appreciation of our Gospel text it is worth reading the whole of Mark 13.

<sup>2</sup> This is certainly true in general of Jewish apocalyptic in both the intertestamental and later period ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apocalyptic\\_literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apocalyptic_literature)). Some might argue that this is not entirely true of Christian apocalyptic. For example, in *The Revelation of St. John* the writer uses the apocalyptic form to roundly pronounce judgment upon the quite wealthy church of Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22) which was apparently part of the “establishment” of the city and so hardly “dispossessed”. Even so, it remained “marginalised” in terms of their shared experience of the Christian diaspora in Asia (Revelation 1:4 & 9). In *Revelation*, then, we are reading a *pastoral letter* (Revelation 1:4) in the *prophetic* tradition (Revelation 1:3), cast in the apocalyptic genre (c.f. Jesus’ “farewell speech” in Mark 13 which also adapts the genre).

<sup>3</sup> Donahue & Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark – Sacra Pagina Commentary*, Liturgical Press, 2002, p.379.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. 1 Enoch. See <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/1enoch.html> for a comparative example.

As with these writings, its concern is the *eschaton* – the end things – where “the final transformation of the world through the intervention of God, would be preceded by an intensified suffering for the elect: a time when evil would “boil over”, as it were, as the powers opposed to God run riot before succumbing to God’s judgement. This is the time of the “Great Affliction”<sup>5</sup> or “birthpangs of the Messiah”<sup>6</sup> preceding the full arrival of the Kingdom.”<sup>7</sup>



For most of us today, bumper stickers aside, “the expectation of Christ’s return in glory, though still affirmed in liturgy and creeds, is hardly a daily preoccupation.”<sup>8</sup> The possibility seems remote – to say the least.



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<sup>5</sup> Mark 13:19.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 13:8.

<sup>7</sup> Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom – A Theological Reading of mark’s Gospel*, Liturgical Press, 2008, p.200.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

“We look back to Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as the chief elements of his saving work. For early generations [of Christians], however, the emphasis was the other way round. It was as the Son of Man returning in glory that Christ would perform his principle messianic role as the agent of the final victory of God.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus’ non-appearance, then, was problematic to such expectation, even to the point of dismay as sinfulness, suffering and death persisted.

The writer to the Hebrews takes up this concern when he writes:

Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

For yet “in a very little while, the one who is coming *will* come and will not delay...”<sup>10</sup>

In possibly the earliest Gospel we have, Mark writes within this same pastoral context. “When will the Lord return to deal with “all these things” [as Mark summarises them<sup>11</sup>]; when will he finally institute the reign of God in all its fullness?

[In a world gone crazy, with war, violence and calamities of all kind a daily item on the news], “just as they did for the first Christians, these events raise the same issues about the faithfulness and power of God... [In the light of our experience], is it still possible to trust God – and cling to the promise of Jesus?”<sup>12</sup>

Mark’s apocalypse, then, is about hope in the midst of uncertain times. <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 10:36-37. See also Paul writing in a similar (more extended) vein in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 13:29 & 31.

<sup>12</sup> Byrne. P.201.

<sup>13</sup> In referring to “Mark’s Gospel”, I remain convinced that the traditional understanding that we are in fact reading Mark’s collection of Peter’s anecdotes of his time with Jesus as he recalled them. I also assume that Mark’s theology, achieved through the structure, style and content of the Gospel, reflects that of Peter. Even so,

Against this backdrop there is an awful lot that could be said of our Gospel reading today. I just want to touch on five points that speak to me from the text:

### **1. God is active – Mk.13:24-25**

“The cosmic disturbances described in verses 24 and 25 resemble Old Testament descriptions of manifestations of God’s judgement in Israel’s history.<sup>14</sup> [The same can be said of the earth quake at the time of Jesus’ death when (as we read in Matthew’s Gospel), in a moment of judgement, the temple curtain is split, the earth shakes and the dead rise.<sup>15</sup>].

This kind of language originated in ancient times when the sun, moon and stars were believed to represent deities who controlled world affairs.

Israel, on the other hand, believed that when their sovereign God acted these celestial bodies were disturbed. In other words, disturbances in the heavens showed that those powers that other nations believed controlled history would be shown up as helpless under God’s power... In [Jesus’] time this belief was still strong... and the meaning of this prophecy would not be lost on his hearers.”<sup>16</sup> God is *active* and in *control*.

### **2. The Son of Man is coming – Mk.13:26-27 (c.f. Daniel 7:13)**

In Daniel 7 (as we heard read), the end-time vindication of the people of God – “the Holy Ones”, as they are called<sup>17</sup> – was to be enacted by one who had the likeness of the Son of Man.

Very early on, Christian apocalyptic identified this somehow human, somehow God-like figure with Jesus. It was also a term, of course, Jesus

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it is, in the end, *Mark’s Gospel* (not Peter’s). See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Eerdmans, 2008, esp., ch.9.

<sup>14</sup> Joel 2:10; 3:15; Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Amos 8:9.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 27:51.

<sup>16</sup> Larry Hurtado, *New International Biblical Commentary*, Hendrickson Pubs, Paternoster Press, 1989, p.222.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel 7:22.

used frequently of himself both to his disciples and before the Council as they sought grounds to put him to death.<sup>18</sup>

Again, the imagery here of Jesus coming upon the clouds to claim his own, though alien (even implausible, perhaps) to us, would have connoted for its *listeners* a sense of God's immanent intervention to save his people.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, known as the father of liberal theology, writing in the late 18<sup>th</sup> early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, identified this intervention with the Enlightenment project of human progress achieved through human agency. The Kingdom of God came as we developed. This has remained a foundation tenant of both theological and secular liberalism ever since though, post Holocaust, it has been a hard position to sustain with any credibility.

The affirmation of this scripture, however, is that regardless of what we imagine God's intervention to look like, it will be achieved decisively and recognisably through *Christ*, who will in person return.

### **3. Understand the times – Mk.13:28-29**

The disciples had asked what would be a sign of the end.<sup>19</sup> Jesus replies that from the fig tree we “learn a lesson”. To *understand our times*, not as random and threatening, but as *pointing to God's purposes* being worked out for humanity and, in particular, for his people.

All things have their season. We *are* living in the end of time – just as the first hearers of Jesus' words were living in the end of time. The end *is* near. Yet the chaotic world of suffering we experience as part of this, points *not* to fear and anxiety, but to *comfort* and *confidence* that Christ is, indeed, the King of history, and history's purpose will be realised in him as it should be.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mark 14:62.

<sup>19</sup> Mark 13:4.

<sup>20</sup> Put differently, we might say: as we live through the apocalypse from “the bottom up”, as it were, we experience the world as random and meaningless – even senselessly cruel. From the “top down” view we get from

#### 4. Trust God's words on "these things"

– Mk.13:30-31 (c.f. vv.2,4&8)

Though the tenor of Jesus' prophecy is futuristic, some of those listening were to experience the calamities and persecutions detailed ahead of our text ("these things", as he summaries them<sup>21</sup>), before they died.

The most calamitous event, of course, was the destruction of the temple he prophesied at the beginning of his speech, and which occurred in AD70. The temple was the central public symbol of Jewish identity. Jesus regarded it, and those who maintained it, as deeply corrupt. It was his uncompromising condemnation of the temple system which ultimately proved too much for the Jewish authorities who, in an unholy alliance, murdered him.

Knowing what lay before both himself and his people, then, Jesus calls his followers not to put our trust in that we can see and touch – not even the creation itself, let alone any human institution. Rather we are to trust the surety of his words.

#### 5. Watch and wait – actively Mk.13:32-33

Jesus finishes his farewell speech not by answering his disciples question of "*when* will this be",<sup>22</sup> but by anticipating the more important question: How then, in view of all "these things", should we live? His answer is for us not to indulge in sooth saying but to be *alert*, to keep *watch* and *wait*...

This is no passive or apathetic fatalism. In his second letter Peter describes our calling as watchers and waiters like this:

Live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

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apocalyptic (the "heavenly" view of Rev.4:1), however, we see that the meaning of these events, taken as a whole, point exactly to the opposite direction.

<sup>21</sup> Mark 13:4, 8, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Mark 13:4.

That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.<sup>23</sup>

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.<sup>24</sup>

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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<sup>23</sup> “...the home of right ordering” ,is that space where God in his faithfulness and good providence, orders aright all of creation so that everything relates to everything else as it is meant to be.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Peter 3:11-14.