

**ADVENT 1**  
**3/12/2006**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Jeremiah 33:14-16**  
**Psalm 25:1-10**  
**I Thessalonians 3:9-13**  
**Luke 21:25-36**

### **Awake to God**

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The season of Advent speaks of a change of time. In the lead up to it, and again today, we have heard readings which convey a sense of looming judgement, and the end of all things. While those who belong to fundamentalist sects generally take such passages literally, and often try and calculate the time, the majority of Christians are not too certain how to sit with this emphasis. We do not live **as if** there will be a final day of reckoning any time soon. And there is evidence that even the first Christians, who had an intense expectation of Jesus's return, had to come to terms with a longer sense of history than first thought.

As we hear those words about signs in the sun and moon, and the shaking of the foundations, and as we are confronted on a daily basis with the news of global warming, war and other upheavals, we can easily be drawn into feeling that the momentous things going on in the world could be connected with these images. But there is no short cut between the scriptures and our world. These texts are difficult material to deal with. Because of films like "Apocalypse Now" and "Towering Inferno" we think of an apocalypse as a disaster. But in biblical thinking this is not so. An apocalypse makes clear something that was previously hidden from view. It often refers to crises and disasters. It often calls on us to imagine things happening on a grand scale and to look for the hope within the chaos. Notice that Luke calls us to lift up our heads and watch, not for destruction, but our redemption that is near.

Apocalyptic literature flourished during times of persecution and disturbance in the lives of Jews and Christians, circumstances in which people were under pressure and faith was apt to lose focus. In Luke this literature aimed to awaken faith in people grown sleepy by the passing of time. It reminded them once more that God would intervene to honour the promise of redemption, and people of faith needed to stay awake if they were not to be swept away by the chaotic forces of darkness.

The Son of Man is the most important title in the New Testament. With one exception it always designates Jesus. And the title is used by Jesus of himself. The Son of Man designates an individual, not humanity in general, and the overwhelming evidence is that it is drawn from the figure in Daniel 7:13 who comes as a heavenly judge in the last days. Jesus' self-description was one that would be **least** compromised by nationalistic overtones and warlike hopes. But the title designated the **new person**, who in the last days would open the way for a new humanity that did not act in the way Adam had done, bringing sin and death to the world. According to the New Testament, Jesus was this man who came to be invested with judicial authority over all humanity. But he was distinguished, not by his Emperor like style, but by his suffering service for the people. The creator of a new humanity was the one who had died for them. His coming again is

to reveal and to reinforce the responsibility the Christian community has towards others, especially the suffering and the weak.

There is a connection between these ideas and the reading from Jeremiah. You will remember that Jeremiah challenged King David, especially over his relationship with Bathsheba. Jeremiah was a fierce critic of the Davidic regime. But, remarkably, in this oracle of salvation he is still able to say that due to God's stock of promises to the house of David, it would be from this gnarled old family tree that a new shoot of life and hope would come. [Graphic] Righteousness did not depend on David, it was born of God. This gracious gift made it possible for kings to do what kings were supposed to do: practice justice and righteousness. Given the state of the Davidic line, this did indeed seem like green shoots coming from a dead tree trunk: but God is the one who promised. And the purpose was to allow a new line of humanity to spring up.

In the Gospels the Apocalyptic Literature always occurs before Jesus' passion and death, and often seems to have symbolic associations with the invasion of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple which came several decades later. What this means is that at the lowest point God is still at work to judge and redeem; to bring life where there seemed only to be death. That is why, at the point when we begin four weeks preparation for our celebration of Jesus' birth, we are introduced to these images, suggestions of upheavals and threat associated with his end. What we hear is an antidote to the sentimentality that so often surrounds the secular celebration of the nativity. The Gospels are telling us that the decisive event that inaugurates the "last days and the Kingdom" is something that appeared to be a complete disaster, and it had its origin in the out of the way birth of a baby. This was the piece of the jigsaw that completed the picture. This was the event, which to the eyes of faith, was a candle of hope in a dark place. This was the bedrock of promise that continued, despite the crisis of those days and the apparent failure of Christ to return.

As we stand on the threshold of a new Christian year we, who are able to look back on 2000 years of Christian faith and wonder what happened to the Kingdom Jesus inaugurated, are directed again to God's promised sovereignty in history. While upheavals and crises continue to threaten and perplex us we find ourselves called to be attentive to fact that deep within history a seed of life and hope has been sown and is even now coming into bud. In the light of this we are challenged not to flag in our witness. Our attempts to find temporal security are questioned. And we are challenged to be ready for God to act amongst us as in times past. The how and the when of that may be uncertain, but there is one thing we do know and trust. It was God who came to us in Jesus Christ, and the call is to be awake to God in him still. Despite the fantastic imagery and threats of disaster, the apocalyptic literature leads us to this one thing: the face of the Son of Man is the crucified Christ. When the time comes it is him we will see.

As we gaze at the flickering flame of our first Advent Candle it seems small and insignificant, compared with the many conflagrations that even now engulf our world. In the context of our own lives, often overwhelmed by cares or physically and mentally exhausted from the year, we may be inclined to be sceptical about this tiny flame and the illumination it can offer us. But as we enter the season of Advent the church asks us to renew our faith in the future God has chosen to give us in Christ, who came to us in

gentleness and suffering. He is the seed of hope and we must be attentive to what may be in bud amongst us, through him.

If the reading from Luke had gone on for one more verse we would have found that, after teaching in the Temple about the end, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray. He prayed in order to be ready for the moment when the foundations of his own existence were shaken to the core. And because he was ready, we are able to see that the shaking of the world that followed was not a disaster, but **a work of grace for our liberation**. In Advent, then, let us deliberately make space for this work of God. Let us choose to get off the escalator of consumerism and the mad Christmas rush, that we may be able to better appreciate this gracious gift, receive it, and live in it, to the praise and glory of God.