

Advent 1
30/11/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

How long will this house last?

Today is the New Year's Day of the Church. You would think that as we begin the lead up to celebrate God's gift in the incarnation we would be in a happy mood, but instead the readings have a darker tone. They speak of troubled times and Mark calls us wake up and watch for the end time and the coming of the Son of Man. As the financial crisis bites more deeply, global warming advances and terrorism extends its reach we have enough thoughts of our own about the end of the world as we know it, why would we want to hear more of such things in church! The season of Advent is not for wallowing in how bad life can get. It is about hope that is born in the midst of the hardships of life.

One writer (Martin Warner – *Church Times*, issue 7601) said that in many of the ancient churches of England, fragments of medieval stained glass have been incorporated into new arrangements as windows were repaired over time. The effect is that when you look at the window ancient pieces that once said something different now tell a new story.

So it is in the Gospel. Mark's picture of dark times is a response to the devastating event of the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in 70 AD, long after the death of Jesus. It is part of Mark's artistry to place on Jesus' lips his own reflection on the destruction of Jerusalem so that it forms the context for what comes next, the judgement of the world, which takes place in the crucifixion. The section we heard follows a visit Jesus and his disciples make to the Temple in Jerusalem where Jesus put the question: "will this building last forever?" The meaning is ambiguous. Literally it can mean: will the city of the Jews, the sign of God's covenant with the people of earth, last forever? Allegorically it also means: will the body of Jesus Christ, the church, endure beyond the sacrifice of his life, and the worst disruptions the world can offer?

The community Mark wrote for knew both of these events in which it seemed the very powers of heaven were shaken, and all was lost. But Mark uses old fragments of literature about judgement and disaster to convey the message that the most catastrophic events do not nullify who God is for us. Rather, the way he uses the title Son of Man shows that in the death of Jesus a new standard of humanity is revealed for the world, based on faithful, self-giving love. This is the yardstick against which all human practice of faith and love will be measured, now and at the end of time. Difficult though it may be to recognise, this is the light that shines through these ancient fragments of story. And this is what is represented today by the candle of hope, the first to be lit in the Advent wreath. We are not a people of gathering darkness. We are a people who know that as the darkness gathered to its deepest point, the life-giving light of Christ was seen to shine on, transcending even death.

The sort of literature from which Mark chose his fragments flourished during times of persecution and disturbance, circumstances in which people of faith were under pressure and felt their zeal flag. This material may seem to focus on the problems, but the real aim was to send an encrypted message that people of faith would be able to decode. They would discover in it an enduring source of hope in a darkened world. God was remembered as one who was and is and will be and the people were called to live in hope that God will maintain solidarity with those who are created and loved, as God's own.

At this time of year the church opens the pages of this strange literature as if it were a touchstone. And with these words from another time of disaster ringing in its ears it chooses to remember that Advent calls the church to watch and wait for a renewed sense of God's presence to appear in the world, despite the difficult circumstances. In both Isaiah and Mark the difficulties are there, just as they are for us in our world, and in our church. But there is also a sense that God transcends these problems, and hope is possible. The texts are intended to keep us focussed on being the people of God. There may be upheavals, there will be false prophets and charlatans, there will be buildings that won't last forever, but people who are awake know their lives are held in a bigger context, and will refuse to be deflected from what this means. And Mark has some good advice for us: be wary of the doomsdayers and scoffers and do not get into counting the signs or the days – for that is to miss the point. Instead stay alert for the approach of God.

The strange thing is, if we understand Mark and his fellow evangelists correctly, the advent of God, as child in a manger, and as the crucified and risen one, was anticipated by very few, and even fewer really understood what had happened. This is not surprising because the advent of Jesus Christ did not reinforce our worldly structures. Its purpose was to point us beyond them to the strength that endures when all else has faded away. To know this, and to find it for ourselves is to enter into the real truth about life and to begin to know what is meant by salvation.

The challenge of Advent is whether or not we can believe that the house that will last is the one we belong to: the household of God. A house that when all else has fragmented and returned to dust will still be there, because it's origin and destiny lies with God.
