

**Advent 1**  
**1/12/2013**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 2:1-5**

**Psalm 111**

**Romans 13:11-14**

**Matthew 24:36-44**

**Of virtue**

---

Our Romans and Matthew readings today reflect the themes we meet on the first Sunday of Advent each year – the “end times” coming of the Son of Man. And so, as is usual with the first Sunday of Advent, our readings carry also a sense of *threat*. The gospel reading speaks of the “rapture” – the snatching away of one and the leaving behind of another, with the implied message being, take care that you are not the one left behind. “Wake up”, “Watch”, “Look out” seems to be the order of the day so far as the tenor of the readings goes. Once they were words of promise which filled believers with hope, for they awaited with longing the end times. Now, I suspect, many believers are not quite sure.

Whatever our present enthusiasm for the end-time as the New Testament portrays it, I want to focus this morning on the moral teaching which Paul associates with the eager expectation of the church in his day. “Lay aside the works of darkness”, Paul exhorts, and he lists among these works such things as drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy (13.13). We understand well enough what he means here, but the intention of such an exhortation changes if the expectation of the times itself changes.

If you believe that indeed the end is nigh, then the moral change Paul talks about is a matter of *preparation*, of getting up to speed with how things soon will be. Paul encourages the Roman Christians to clothe themselves in the armour of light, to live as if it were day because it soon *will* be day. Moral action here is about the destiny of the world and of ourselves as part of it.

If, however, the expectation of the end disappears – perhaps because of the simple passage of time – then the moral teaching takes on a different character. If there is no expectation of an end, then morality becomes much more about us and about general rules of good and bad behaviour which prevail in our particular time. The eschatology – the nature of the time in which we live (rather than just the social space) – drops out of the matter.

But for Paul the point is that our actions *speak*. We live are to in such a way as to indicate that there is more going on that we can see. This makes a declaration about the nature of the times we live in and, in particular, about the presence or absence of God.

Or, to put it a little differently and to re-connect with our thinking from last week, we might interpret what Paul considers moral failure as the sign of impatience – and an impatience with *God*, in particular. The clearest biblical illustration of this are the events which took place at the foot of Mount Sinai during the time when Moses was on that holy mountain, receiving the law of God. Tired of waiting for Moses to return, the Israelites turn to his brother Aaron to make for them a god to worship. The result

of this was the creation of the golden calf, and the declaration that this calf – clearly present – was the god who had brought the people out of Egypt (Exodus 32).

This is more than a story about the moral or religious failure of the Israelites. It serves as a symbol for all sin, not simply as idolatry but also as impatience with the God who does matter. It is impatience with our situation which causes us to wander into the territory of sin. Impatience with our partners opens up the way into infidelity; impatience with the needs or demands of another leads us to violence against him; impatience with not having causes us to overextend our finances, or simply to take what is not ours.

Last week we noted how impatience seeks to exercise strength or power to force the changes in the world we desire. Impatience reads the times in which we live as empty of value, unless we fill them with something. There is no need to wait, nothing which properly stands between us and what we need or desire, and so I can act to fill the times myself in dishonesty or infidelity, or some other socially destructive behaviour. Sin declares the times empty of God, that there is nothing which properly requires us to *wait*, so that all that matters are things we are to *take*. Sin, then, is the expression of a kind of hopelessness, or of despair – even if often secret, unspoken or even unrecognised despair. It declares the absence of God and builds a golden calf of one kind or another to fill in the space where we think God ought to have been. Something is missing, and we fill it with chocolate, or new shoes or internet porn or a bigger car, or whatever. If our time really is empty, and God is neither present nor coming, then these options are simply that – options, with no values on them other than their price tag. There is no wrong or right here, no reason for saying yes or no to anything other than whether or not it appeals to us personally.

From a Christian perspective, then, sin arises from the secret despair that there is no point in waiting, that our times are not moving towards anything new and so are only what *we* make of them. Recalling last week again, patience is, here, no virtue but only wasted opportunity for self-realisation.

But Paul tells a different story. His exhortation to a particular kind of living is not only about what is right or what is wrong, but sees rightness and wrongness as being caught up in the nature of our time. It is because this *is* a time of waiting, that we are to live in particular ways. More fully – and again recalling last week – because our existence is a *mediated* one, because what we need passes through others, how we live towards others matters. Ours is not a time of simple self-realisation. That we cannot fully realise for ourselves the things we need – that we must wait for them to be realised for us – is reflected by not all things being options for us in our personal behaviour. The despairing soul which hopes for nothing has all options open to him – if he also has the power to realise them. But the patient soul does not, for she sees her time as darkness before the dawn, and prepares herself for the dawn. The day which is dawning, towards which she looks, is a day we will have together: a common life of love with justice. A life of love with justice, lived while it is still dark, testifies to this otherwise unknowable truth, and trains us to recognise when the day is about to break.

It may be the case that patience is a virtue, but it is also the case that *virtue is patience*, for waiting well points to wait it is we wait for. The godly life testifies to things not yet seen, lives as in the day though it is still dark, and awaits the dawn.

“Now is the time to wake up from sleep”, Paul declares, “for the night is far gone, and the day is at hand. “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light”, becoming beacons by which the world might see and better understand what we are created to be. Let us work and strive for the things which anticipate that full humanity and, in this active waiting, demonstrate our patience for those things which are God’s own work.

By the grace of God, may such a patience and life of testimony to God’s coming dawn be ours, to our greater humanity and God’s greater glory. Amen.

\*\*\*