

Pentecost 25
14/11/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Daniel 12:1-3
Psalm 16
Mark 13:1-14

On being God's apocalypse

In a sentence:

God is revealed in the person of Jesus and continues to be revealed in the lives of God's people

“Not one stone left upon another...”

I confess that last month's earthquake made me wonder whether our calculations might have been simplified a bit here at Curzon Street: not one brick left upon another! But still it stands!

Yet, had it tumbled down, similarities between that destruction and the prediction in today's reading would only be superficial. For us, a collapse might mean sadness and but perhaps also relief. For Jesus' disciples, it was a matter of horror: how could such a thing come about?

The terms in which Jesus speaks here are classically apocalyptic. Apocalyptic thinking anticipated an in-breaking of God's righteousness in answer to the unrighteousness of the world. The apocalypse of God – literally, the *revealing* of God – was the manifestation of God's glory, a manifestation which would lead to a judgement and a setting right of wrongs. Very often, this final consummation of all things was to be preceded by a breaking down of social and political order, of which the predicted destruction of the Temple in today's reading would be a dramatic sign.

Of course, we don't need apocalyptic thought to recognise that all things come to an end. We have enough historical and personal awareness to know that everything ends. But our text is not about the way of all the earth, by which we reasonably expect there will come a day without Google or Netflix, the United States or China. Jesus makes a prediction which disrupts even this expectation. He points not to earthquakes or entropy or the dialectical mechanisms of history but to the rattling of the world with the approach of God.

It's not entirely clear, then, whether the approach of God is a good thing or bad. “When will these things be?” the disciples ask. Such a question asks about “managing” God's approach, about being placed as well as possible when God gets here, about becoming a small a target. Jesus speaks elsewhere of the approach of God as being like the coming of a thief in the night, with an implied warning: be ready at all times. We usually focus here on the suddenness – the unpredictability – of God's otherwise welcome return, but perhaps the *activity* of the thief should not be dismissed too quickly. For the approach of God is not without threat: the thief comes to take what we value. God is also a challenge to what we value.

And *how* does God approach? What does God look like when God comes? As the rest of Chapter 13 unfolds, Jesus speaks of the persecution of believers before God finally arrives. The world does not like what it sees in these ones – in the disciples of Jesus. This is because they are not how they should be: they are not as we are, for that is our

ultimate measure of others. I persecute one in whom I do not like what I see, in whom I do not see myself.

I can relate to this. There is an old man who hides in the mirrors at our place and who jumps out to frighten me whenever I pass by. Perhaps something similar happens at your place? And perhaps one grows used to this? Whatever the case, such mirrors are the engines of persecution. When we look at each other, we expect to see something of ourselves. You, if you are in radical difference from me, should not be here – you black person, you asylum seeker, you infidel.

The tribulation Jesus describes is, then, what happens when God comes close in the person of *believers*. It is not suffering in general but the suffering which *God* brings when God affects people. This suffering is what happens when the world cannot bear what it sees when it looks in a mirror: we do not recognise ourselves, believer, when we look at you. You look like Jesus, but Jesus didn't look enough like us.

It is the presence of God in the persons of believers, then, which are the cause of the tribulations, the wars and rumours of wars. The apocalypse, then – the revelation of God – is not God's *response* to the evil in the world; it is the *cause* of the strife.

The revelation of God disrupts the settled world. This is obvious in the more dramatic apocalyptic texts. Yet, the crucial revelation in the Bible is not the end-time apocalyptic overturning of all things but *the life and ministry of Jesus*. For the New Testament, Jesus is the apocalypse of God. Jesus is what the glory of God looks like in the world.

Perhaps this is acceptable to our moral sensibilities, at least through those parts of the gospel when Jesus is doing and saying Godly things. But Jesus is also crucified, which looks like a *negation* of God's glory but is in fact its intensification: the glory of God is the crucified Jesus. Or, in terms of apocalyptic thinking, the crucified Jesus is God's apocalypse, God's self-revelation. Nothing else in all the horror and splendour of New Testament apocalyptic matters more than this: the crucified Jesus is the revelation of the glory of God.

The cross, of course, is a kind of "negative" glory, in the way that old film-based photography produced an image of "reversed" colour. We can discern in a photographic negative what the image is but it is both exact and shockingly distorted. It is both us and not us – our ghost. The cross is God's glory in negative – God's glory as *God* sees it, God's glory in the form of the world. *We* cannot yet see the glory in it. But in the light of the resurrection – the light of the Father's love – the cross becomes the apocalypse: we see God in Jesus, even crucified.

This is not a new thought. The glory of God, wrote the 2nd Century bishop Irenaeus, is a human being fully alive. What God reveals – God's apocalypse – is just this: a human being fully alive *in whatever circumstances* – suckling at the breast, learning in the synagogue, teaching in town squares, dying on a cross. Or crossing a dangerous sea to safety, struggling to hold a marriage together, grieving the loss of a life's love, wondering about that old face in the mirror. We, too, are material for the apocalypse of God.

The ancient controversies about the humanity and divinity of Jesus, which lead to the cascading of affirmations about him in the creeds – God from God, light from light, of one being with the Father, begotten not made... – these are not about theological minutiae. They are about whether the world in which we live – the world which we *are* – can be a revealing of God's glory. Can God be here, Now, in a crucifying world, or a warring one, or a burning one?

It may be that what we see or are living looks little like God's glory. We may have lost the Temple, the standing, the resources, the energy, the youth, the time, the companions. Or, perhaps in other ways we have these and imagine that these are signs of God's proximity.

Yet, do not be led astray: these things are not the end. Only God is the end. And so God is our beginning, now. The glory of God – human beings fully alive – is possible in all things.

Let us then, in Jesus, live towards that possibility:
becoming the apocalypse of God.
