

**Advent 1**  
**27/11/2011**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 64:1-9**

**Psalm 80**

**1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

**Mark 13:24-37**

**It is time for you to wake from sleeping: on being ready for life**

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*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...* These are words of one who laments God's absence, and yearns to know God's active presence again. The voice is probably that of exiles who, having been liberated from Babylon have returned home to find the Temple in ruins and the pleasant places spoiled. Life at home proved to be much more demanding than expected. It seemed more like judgement than hope fulfilled. There were ruins, conflicts, hardship. Where was the Living God, the God of power? Holding to a living faith was a struggle. *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...* If God would only act again the people's hopes would be restored and scoffing neighbours would be put to shame.

The mood seems rather apropos in a year marked by many disasters and disruptions which have included our own share of personal crises, losses and challenges to faith. The foundations have been shaken. At times it seemed as though death has been stalking us. Uncertainty abounds and this extends everything including faith.

"*Spirituality's fine by us but there's little faith in religion*" wrote Barney Zwartz this week [Age 22/11/2011 p 7]. As Atheism and apathy appear to advance, where is God? Is faith still viable? Are we facing "the end"? Are these the dark days of prophetic proclamation?

This is the New Year's Day of the Church when we begin reading from a different Gospel. The curious thing is that, instead of starting at the beginning, we go to a reading from Chapter 13 in Mark where we encounter the dark, apocalyptic literature which announces the end time and coming of the Son of Man. As we turn to focus on the celebration of the beginning of Jesus' life we hear a call to watch out for the end – the fulfilment of God's purposes in history. In the church, everything means something. We have to wrestle with Chapter 13 of Mark if it is to yield its meaning to us.

The reading from Mark is a restrained example of the genre of apocalyptic literature: stories of disaster and hope that flourished during times of persecution and disturbance to give hope to people under pressure whose faith was apt to flag. The aim of this literature was not to focus on the problems, or to call for a withdrawal from engagement with the world, but to light a candle of hope in a dark context. God was remembered as one who was present in the midst of past disruptions. However devastating the present circumstances might seem to be the people were called to live, remembering they belong to God and God to them. This image is connected with Isaiah's word about the potter and the clay: God who moulds and remoulds the people through the great shifts that occur in history. Through the process of crushing down that precedes a building up, the people are called to watch and wait for a renewed sense of God's presence to appear. Isaiah and Mark do not shy away from the difficulties. In different ways they point us to the one thing that can be trusted, which allows us to continue to live: the ongoing mercy of God that brings forth new life, new faith, new hope and understanding.

Mark's picture of dark times is linked to two things: the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem and Jesus' words about his upcoming trial and death. If you read the whole of Chapter 13 and see it in this context it is possible to see Mark's meaning. The church was born into life at a time that included two poles of devastating destruction and profound loss. This time, in which the very powers of heaven were shaken and the most precious one was destroyed, was one in which the first Christians were crushed down and remoulded into a community of faith with a task to fulfil. The memory of this time is evoked for us every time we break the bread and drink the wine, and declare: "we are the body of Christ!". This is the light shines for us symbolised by the first candle in the Advent wreath. It is attentiveness to this light that enables to continue to work for faith and life and justice in a dark context.

The thirteenth chapter of Mark is a wake up call. It aims to create a people who are alert. Not mute, or inert, but alert. What they are to be ready for is not a tally of the number of signs they can identify, or speculate about when the fulfilment of God's purposes will be. They are called to be alert to God, in the midst of life. They are called to be ready for life. They are called to be ready to live a gospel life.

Whether you are concerned with faith, global economics, climate change or natural disasters, there are many voices claiming to know that we are in or about to enter a critical time of judgement. One of the painful things for church people living today is that new things are stirring in our context while we are much under attack. It is difficult to hold onto the story that has nurtured us thus far. Like Israel of old, we find ourselves surrounded by neighbours who look for demonstrable proof of what we believe in, and accuse us of holding onto a meaningless framework of truth. These are critical times. But today's message is that such times can be creative if we don't fall asleep to what is going on.

If we follow Mark today we will not count the days, or withdraw from the world and ignore the difficulties. We will seek to stay alert, maintaining a defiant hope in the midst of all our struggles.

Mark has no story of the incarnation to warm us: but as we shall hear next week he begins with the announcement of good news. He speaks in the knowledge that something significant grew from a seed that fell into the ground and died. It was a seed, moulded by the hands of the Potter who called forth faith and life from a place where both had disappeared.

Three times Mark says to us "Keep awake". Staying awake begins with one thing: trust in the ultimate goodness of God. Everything else falls into place after that. Living in the hope of Advent means that, despite what is going on around us, we shall have God. Everything Advent and Christmas points us to shows us we are heirs to something that nothing can take away. We shall have God, because God has chosen to have us.

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