

Advent 1
27/11/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14
Psalm 122
Matthew 24:36-44

A sign of the times

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Sandy Yule

[Note: This is a close relative of the sermon that was actually preached on Sunday morning. It has been written both before and after that sermon.]

'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father' (Matthew 24:36).

This is the first Sunday in Advent, and so also the first Sunday of the church's year. I have long been enamoured of Advent as a season, mainly because it begins with such a realistic view of our world. "There will be wars and rumours of wars' (Matthew 24:6). Enough said. Does not our pervasive, even global, anxiety rest on the threat of destructive conflict and the reality of it in all too many places?

In preparing for this sermon, I was struck by the oddity of a beginning which features the Second Coming of Christ as its main theme. At least you can say that it does make for a fully circular progression around the year! But how can this be a genuine beginning when it refers to the post-resurrection expectation of the return of Jesus, of whom we have presumably not yet heard? Perhaps we should simply acknowledge that each aspect of the church's year has a topical place within the story of Jesus and a connection with God's eternity, so that it is quite different from the secular idea of the New Year.

It is noteworthy that, at least in the Uniting Church, we don't speak much of the Second Coming of Christ. This is true for me also. Whenever the topic comes up, this is the text that I quote. 'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father' (Matthew 24:36). While the text literally refers only to the timing of the Second Coming, this ignorance is easily seen to be more global, as we have little idea or agreement as to what we are really expecting when we expect the Second Coming of Christ. I think I hope that it absolves me from too much knowledge of the topic, leading to the practical strategy of ignoring it. I do believe that this is preferable to the strategy of those who talk incessantly about the Second Coming and who use this as a reason why they don't need to worry about present sufferers and the works of love.

Yet the church continues to present the Second Coming as crucial to our faith. This is because it holds out the promise that there will be a genuine judgement of the world and that evil will be definitively overcome. This is unimaginable to us, which is why the belief is couched in these strange and otherworldly terms. Some have tried to interpret the Second Coming as already fulfilled in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. While it is true that the Holy Spirit makes present to us the things of Christ, regularly bridging the gap between the Risen Christ, seated at the right hand of God and ourselves, this idea only works if the Spirit is other than the person of Christ. Others have tried to interpret the Second Coming as the time when the teachings of Jesus and

the real love of God in our hearts become so universal that evil and conflict is overcome. This is also a likely part of the truth, but the inbreaking, judging power of God is more than our human harmonious living. I conclude that we should frankly admit that we don't have any clear idea of what the Second Coming might be like, nor what it means, apart from the essential reference to the time of the overcoming of evil, the judgement of our world and the public and visible inauguration of the reign of God.

Turning to our actual world, I can't escape feelings of foreboding when I contemplate the candidacy and eventual election of Donald Trump, which has persistently dominated our media for a full year. Commentators of all stripes have been consistently wrong-footed by candidate Trump, who has shown considerable skill in half-saying dreadfully racist, sexist and misogynist things which the media felt obliged to publish (and which the transfixed interest of the viewing world encouraged them to keep publishing). The mismatch between what media pundits made of it and the support that he got from a significant section of American voters continues to baffle me. The best account of that that I heard was that his critics took him literally but not seriously, while his supporters took him seriously but not literally.

It is deeply disturbing to recognize that we have descended into a 'post-truth' world in our political culture. This is true here also, though in a less extreme form. Listening to candidate Trump, I was constantly wanting to invoke an ABC fact checker for confirmation that what I was hearing was untrue. When I was in Florida, a week or so before the election, I had a chance encounter with a man in the street who was convinced that Hillary Clinton had done many illegal things and that it was only her high connections that had kept her out of gaol. This man initiated the conversation with me and was at pains to let me know that, as far as he was concerned, it was all about winning politically. I feel that in this man, I encountered the reality of the post-truth world, where my concerns struggled to find a place.

What can we expect from President Trump? He has moved away from much of his campaign rhetoric the day after he was declared the winner of the election. It may be true that he is the one person who might be able to contain the divisive forces that he himself has let loose, though whether he will want to do so is most unclear. In the strange ways of history, conservative leaders can sometimes do good things not available to more progressive or left wing leaders who are also democrats. Yet the signs remain gloomy and many useful international alliances have been unsettled. Much is at stake when we remember the military power of the United States and the constant temptations to use it. Our fears circle back to wars and rumours of wars.

If our fears are not groundless, what should we say about them? The message of the advent season is that God has already acted to establish what is good and that it is God who is the one with whom we ultimately have to deal, in life and in death. Behind all the dark signs of the times, there is the light of hope that we glimpse in the prophetic words of scripture, that we hope for a time when all nations 'shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; [that] nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' (Isaiah 2:4). While this will not be good news while individual citizens maintain their arsenals, we can extend our hope to include all who rely on violence for their security, which obviously still includes ourselves. This is not a sensible, human project; it is a visionary hope that can only make sense on the basis of a transformation of the conditions of our lives that we do not comprehend and that we probably cannot comprehend. This is, nevertheless, a part of our faith to which we should remain open. For maintaining the faith, it is enough that we do not reject this vision as impossibly utopian, but recognize that it comes to us

from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. True peace, with justice for all, that satisfies the deep desire for fullness of life of the human heart, is contained as promise within God. It is enough for faith that we do not turn away from the promises of God, no matter how distant they seem from our everyday experience. In practice, we are challenged to wake up, to stay alert and to look for the signs of God's reign which are even now appearing in our world.
