

Advent 1
1/12/2019

Mark the Evangelist

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

The coming God

In a sentence

The God who is coming is the one who has already come, and comes again in the same way

On the first Sunday of Advent each year we hear a gospel reading like that today, from the synoptic gospel of the liturgical year's new cycle of readings. These texts are strange to modern ears. First century Palestinians expected the world to end in a way not unlike Jesus describes but we have great difficulty committing to that expectation.

The difficulty is largely in that these texts appear to us to be *someone else's* ideas about the arrival of God. In fact, it is the force of the 'someone else' which makes them *mere* ideas, mere speculation in our hearing. Because we cannot find ourselves in them or – more to the point – because we can't find these ideas naturally within ourselves they are *mere* ideas, and don't seem to be very good ones at that.

But this ought not to trouble us too much if we understand how the Scriptures work. For not even Jesus' own 'ideas' are to be found in the Scriptures. Or, perhaps more accurately, it is not that they are *the ideas of Jesus* which makes them important.

This is because, despite all appearances, such passages are not in the Scriptures simply as theories about the end of the world. They are, rather, part of the Scriptures of a community which believed they had something to do with that end of the world which has *already been seen* in the person of Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection. This is the true end of all things, around which all other Scriptural thoughts revolve.

And so, our text this morning is not speculation or even sure *information* about what will happen 'next'. If Jesus ever said anything along the lines of our reading this morning – and he almost certainly did – the importance of what he said is not in his authority as teacher but in that he himself is the 'Son of Man' he describes. The 'Son of Man' is a complex figure in the New Testament, drawing on several Old Testament concepts in nuanced ways. Yet, in the end, we do justice to the concept by recognising that Jesus himself is this figure. This is because, in the end, Jesus is the reference point for everything which matters in the Scriptures.

Who *he* is, then, deeply affects what he speaks about in these sayings. Or – to put it more concretely – any approach of the Son of Man will be in accord with what we have already seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The God who is coming is the God who has already been in Jesus. That *Jesus* is Lord – that *Jesus* is the Son of Man – changes everything, even what seems to be Jesus' own understanding of what is yet to come.

The effect of this is to introduce a deep irony into our hearing of Jesus' words in today's readings. For if Jesus himself is already come as the Son of Man, then the result has *not* been the radical shaking of the world in old-style apocalyptic terms. Amazingly, and in stark contrast with the expectation, the Son of Man comes *and scarcely anyone notices*, even after the resurrection.

But this hiddenness of the end of the world is not a weak thing. Remember that there *is* a resurrection from the dead at the heart of this story – the radical creation of something new from the nothingness of death.

For the New Testament asks the unexpected question: what is the end of the world if *Jesus* is Lord, if Jesus is the Son of Man, is the Christ, is judgement, is grace; what is the end of the world if Jesus is the economy, is the environment, is the significance of death? What is climate change or a terrorist attack or crushed protests in Hong Kong, if Jesus is Lord?

'What is the end of the world if Jesus is Lord?' is an important question because our worlds are *full* of endings, full of public and personal 'apocalyptic' moments which come crashing down upon us: the news of serious illness, the death of one we love, lasting disability from an accident, road rage, divorce, the loss of employment or reputation. These are apocalyptic not only in the narrow sense of 'thunderbolts and lightning, very, very frightening' but also in the sense that they reveal who we are and who we think God is ('apocalypse' come from Greek words meaning '[bring] from hiddenness'). 'Why did this happen to me?' is not just the pathos-filled cry of the suddenly wounded; it speaks deeply of my sense of my own righteousness and of God's obligations, both now under serious strain.

The same applies, of course, to the positive 'apocalypses' in our lives: falling in love, the birth of a child, the receipt of a much needed gift. We don't usually ask 'Why did this happen to me?' on these occasions but even that is telling.

For despite our assumptions about how our worlds should end or continue, if God is part of the picture there is no real 'why' about what good or ill happens, because God is not *properly* part of any equation.

To find God in these things – to see God's proper relation to the ups and downs of our lives – is a difficult and rare thing, because we *prefer* life to be an equation. That God does not fit into this preference makes it difficult to see God, present in God's own strange way. It is rare, that is, to hold that the world is God's natural habitat, that God could be with us in the midst of all this mess *and still be God*, still be calling us and enabling us to be more richly and deeply *human*.

To borrow from the imagery Jesus uses, we all experience the same world of gift and threat. In his example, two are working on preparing the same rows in the same field, or working together on the same meal in the same kitchen, but this is the work *of God* only for one of them. It is not so much, then, that one is taken and one is left behind. It is rather that one was not really, fully, there in the first place.

And this is the question put to us when God comes: are you really *there* in the midst of the swirling world? Do you know, in that storm, who you are and where God is? The answer for us all will be, at some time – most likely just now – that we do not know: that we have not heard, or that we have forgotten, or that we fear that God's naming of us is not true. The question in Jesus' vivid account of the end is not so much 'will you be ready?' but will you *recognise* God as the one who has brought you 'safe thus far', and who comes finally to 'lead you home'?

Such recognition takes practice – eyes trained to distinguish between dots and blurs on the horizon, ears attuned to hear unexpected harmonies in life’s discord. For this we have the faith of the church, not that Jesus is *Lord* – mere information about God – but that *the crucified Jesus* is Lord: that God is shown to be present in our very midst, whether in the unbounded possibilities of gurgling life in a manger or in the hopeless last breath of a executed criminal.

God is already shown to be present to the height and length, the depth and breadth of our worlds.

This is to say that the Son of Man does come at an unexpected hour – *this* very hour, claiming us again as God’s own. Our end is in God’s beginning with us, which has already begun.

Now, then, St Paul reminds us, is the time to wake from sleep and walk in the Lord’s light.
