Advent 1 **Mark the Evangelist**
30/11/2025

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Matthew 24:36-44

On the fear of God

ForeWord

The bad-news apocalypse

Those of you who peruse *The Conversation* online may have noticed a piece last week reflecting on the impact of AI on writing, and this within the threat of an "AI apocalypse" bringing at least that aspect of human creativity – writing – to an end.

I don't want to spend too much time today on the question of the AI apocalypse, but rather to note the way in which the word "apocalypse" is used here.

We've noted before that the Greek word which gives us our English "apocalypse" has the basic meaning of "from hiddenness" or, more simply, "revelation". This is lost in our modern usage, where apocalypse is not about revelation but about just one feature of New Testament apocalyptic thought, which is the end of the world as we know it, and the great overcoming of satanic power in the battle at Armageddon.

To speak of an AI apocalypse is to reference this kind of radical destruction of the familiar order. On this hearing, an apocalypse is always a bad thing: the AI apocalypse, the nuclear apocalypse, the environmental apocalypse, the zombie apocalypse. These are breakdowns in the order of things, usually springing from some very human miscalculation.

The good-news apocalypse

This is not how the apocalypse works within the scriptural testimony. Apocalyptic thinking begins to appear late in the Old Testament, where it serves the purpose of answering a pressing question: Where on earth is God?

The question of the faithful was, Why, if we are faithful, do we continue to suffer as we do? This was a question about whether God is faithful, reliable, and righteous, and about where God's righteousness will be manifest. The hoped-for apocalypse was the revelation precisely of God's righteousness. And the apocalyptic mind imagined that righteousness would be revealed in the near future: God is imminent.

The classical prophets answered the same question differently. For them, suffering was the result of the people's sin. The marauding Assyrians and Babylonians who decimated old Israel and Judah were God's punishment. But the apocalyptic mind separates suffering from guilt and looks for an alternative accounting for the suffering of the faithful: God is absent, away, but coming. The anticipated arrival of God – and with it, the *apocalypse* of God's righteousness – was then something to which the faithful looked forward with eager anticipation. All things will then be well.

Of course, such a setting right involves a judgment against what is not right, and those responsible for any not-rightness in the world. This is to say that the coming apocalypse is only good news for those who suffer unjustly, and is bad news for those responsible for the unjust suffering of others.

With this orientation around apocalyptic thinking, then, let's now listen to the reading from Matthew's gospel set for today. The first Sunday in Advent always begins with a reading about the approach of God, in apocalyptic terms. Listen for whether the text comes as good news, or perhaps not.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: Matthew 24. 36-44)

Word: Proclamation

God's coming as threat

Things arriving at unexpected times are not usually all that welcome: unannounced guests. A heart attack. A stock market crash. A shark in the bay. A fire in the apartment building. Psychologists tell us that our brains are prediction machines: they constantly survey what is happening around us to anticipate what might happen next, and this as a survival technique. Surprises can be dangerous.

It's in this key that we hear from Jesus, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your lord is coming".

We don't get the impression that this is good news. The hopeful anticipation of the arrival of God to set things right is overshadowed by the arrival of God as the threatening thing: "Therefore you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour". This is the apocalypse we might not want. An element of threat and fear is now introduced. God is coming; shape up. There is something dangerous here.

The idea of the fear of the Lord is politely understated or even dismissed in many modern Christian circles. We would rather say, not that we should fear God, but rather love God: fear is surely bad, and love is good.

But this misses the biblical polemic (for the Bible is always polemical). When the Scriptures speak about the fear of the Lord, the emphasis falls not on "fear" but on "the Lord". Recalling the notion of "the fear of the Lord" from the Old Testament, the expression "the LORD" is the name of one particular god, among other gods. The point is, Fear *the LORD*, and not some other god-like thing. It's like saying, don't eat chocolate, eat an apple. The assumption is that we will eat *something* – or fear something – so the question is, What is the best thing to eat, or fear? To speak of the beginning of wisdom as the fear of the LORD, is to say that if you're going to fear anything in the world, let it be *this* one.

In this way, the Scriptures pose a theory about us: that the human is a being profoundly given to fears. And these fears make us do things which reduce our humanity and the humanity of those around us. If this is the case – if it is not possible for us to stop fearing – we might as well at least fear that which is ultimately life-giving rather than life-denying. The fear of the Lord is not an addition to whatever else we might already fear, but a revaluation of our fears.

Fear against fear

And so when it comes to our Gospel text today, with its implication that the day and the hour of the coming of God is a time to be feared, the thought is not that God will arrive like AI or a thermonuclear weapon or a roasting climate to disrupt our comfort. It is that our comfort itself is already built upon fear. AI, massively destructive weapons and climate change all have to do with responses we have already made to the fears and desires that drive us. The fear of each other that drives arms races, or the vulnerability and fear of dependence which drives the capitalist economy, or the fear of

inconvenience and falling behind which drives the carbon economy – these fears are all very real for us. The fear of rejection by which we push others away. The fear of being overwhelmed by which we justify not doing what we can to help. The fear of judgement which keeps us quiet when something should be said.

But Jesus' call to be ready for the arrival of God is not the announcement of another front on which to defend ourselves. If the arrival of God is to be feared, it is not for fear's sake. It is in order to be released from other fears.

Why we do what we do is very much a question of what we fear. If we think and act wrongly – and moral thought and action are important undertones to what Jesus says here – it is for fear of what happens if we don't. And so the issue gospel apocalyptic seeks to address is less *what* we are or aren't doing than *why*: what fears and anxieties do our moral failures address?

God's arrival, then, is not merely about reward or punishment – if at all. For those of us – most of us – in the wrong place, God's arrival is a setting free. What we need from God is that God might set us free from our fears, and from what we do to settle those fears. To fear the Lord is to stop fearing other things. It is to see that we are often in the wrong because we have feared the wrong things.

But freedom from fear is not easy. Freedom from fear is hard just because we have so much invested in keeping fear at bay. Sovereign borders, financial investments, insurances, locks, passwords and secrets – such things protect our way of living, secure our health and longevity, ensure our reputation, safeguard the stuff we might still need.

For most of us, this is all so deeply embedded in how we live that we have forgotten that it's there. But the revelation – the apocalypse – of God is a revealing also of the nature of the world and the powers within it. It's because these powers are great and oppressive in the world that we have vivid biblical images not of "apocalyptic" struggles but of *liberating* struggles. Freedom from the powers we fear in the world is the revolution we need. The biblical apocalypse reveals not only the searing righteousness of God but the freedom of the children of God.

Do we not need to be set free? If we pray, is it not precisely for liberation from fear and oppression?

It is into such a world as ours that God does not threaten but promises to come.

As we hear Jesus' call to stay awake, then, let it not be for fear's sake.

Let us, indeed, examine ourselves – our commitments, our investments in life, our permissions, our hesitations – but not for fear that God might catch us unawares.

Let us rather do this towards the freedom from fear we need, and towards becoming ourselves signs of the proximity, the in-reach, freedom and fullness of life God will bring.

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