

Judgement of the World

Mark 13: 24-37

Advent Sunday, Year B

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+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Your community here at Benedictus has a decisive vocation, and a radical identity, centred on contemplation. In a world of endless talk, self-assertion and rivalry you choose silence, you seek room to breathe, and you withdraw—not to escape from the world, but to gain perspective on the world. Because critical perspective is so necessary, isn't it? This capacity to resist the siren song of manufactured desires and imaginative entrapment is exactly what the world needs to see from the Church, in what's now being called a post-secular age—an age when life-enhancing religion might again get a hearing, and win adherents afresh, even in our Western world where institutional religion has long been in decline. But what hasn't declined is the social function of religion, which continues in various new secular guises, quite apart from Christianity and Church. And its around this social function of religion that problems congregate.

The *social* function of religion is an amalgam of fascination, convention, social control and tribalism. But now it's nation states, free markets, political ideologies, gun ownership, nuclear weapons, media spectacles, social media trends, trophy homes, luxury goods and pornographic fantasies that we worship—take your pick, or if you're an American you can take them all! The right thinking among us say that we're better off without religion, but in truth it's the social function of religion that have to watch out for, whenever it unifies at the price of exclusion, or comforts at the cost of brutalising. And here the reality of God doesn't get a look in: ideology,

nationalism, the free market or whatever false god perfectly suffices, when even traditional religions like Islam or American Protestantism are annexed to violent, self-justifying ends.

All this is what René Girard refers to as the false sacred, a human discovery that's helped to impose order on our world from the beginning of stable human communities, though never without a cost, never without casualties. In Mark's Gospel, Chapter 13, from which we hear tonight, Jesus acknowledges this state of affairs while announcing its eclipse, declaring the Advent of something different—a new version of the sacred is dawning that will surprise and confound everyone, and which entails a risk for everyone who understands it and embraces it, though it doesn't require us to think of God as violent or punishing, which is how this passage has often been read.

Let me take a moment to set the scene. Jesus uses the language of apocalypse earlier in Mark 13, before what we've heard tonight. He announces the destruction of the temple, which would come thanks to the Romans soon after his time, and with it a whole socio-political world-view. Jesus uses the language of cosmic conflagration to illustrate plain historical facts of social crisis, which is also what we see in fiction and folk tale and film, isn't it? So a storm symbolizes a grave emotional upset, a famine symbolizes a blighted community, while a solar eclipse symbolizes complete loss of bearings.

Here Jesus is taking apocalyptic imagery from nature and using it to show what's happening in history, in the here and now. Along with earthquakes, famines and other natural disasters—the language of mythology—Jesus mentions wars, trials, family divisions and other quite ordinary, familiar markers of human conflict. And his message is not to panic, not to go into a religious frenzy, not to go looking for messiahs and seeking to uncover some special message in all of this. The only message is that a certain way of organizing the world is coming to an end, with a lot of disorder and discomfort that can't be kept under control by the old methods. The false sacred has run off the rails. For Girard, this is what Jesus means when,

elsewhere in the Gospel, he declares that “I see Satan fall like lightning” and “I come not to bring peace but a sword”. In other words, since the whole false sacred spectacle is running down, the world is now a less controllable, a more dangerous place.

Now, that’s the context for understanding tonight’s Gospel. The darkened sun and the failing great lights of heaven, the convulsion of the natural order, is all metaphorical, referring not to some coming assault on our world by an angry God, but to an alarming and unexpected eruption of grace and goodness, of gentleness and liberating newness in Jesus Christ, out of God’s love for the world. Jesus hollows out apocalyptic language and refills it with a new eschatological message of hope in the present—before this generation passes away, as Jesus tells his hearers. Something new is at the very gates, bringing an end to the false sacred, and hence an end to the old division of heaven and earth, which we’re told is passing away. Instead, here is a new synergy of heaven and earth in the person of Jesus Christ. This is an inclusive reality from God, greater than any spectacle, extending as high as the clouds and as wide as the four winds—that is, to the full height and breadth of reality—as Jesus gathers his elect into a new life together with God. This is what our reading tonight declares.

And then comes the challenge, to watch for it and look for it because we won’t necessarily know what we’re looking for, and nothing will have prepared us for it. And only God the Father is fully in the loop. Not the angels, because they’ve been pillars of the old cosmology and the New Testament hasn’t yet completed their rehabilitation as witnesses to Jesus Christ, and not even the Son, because Jesus himself becomes powerless, and isn’t directing the action.

The first thing to look out for is that what’s dawning brings gentleness and vulnerability and a change that will prove welcome, like the fresh shoots on a fig tree that suggest the coming delights of summer. It’s not the old violent sacred order, but something new and gracious and enticing that we won’t want to miss—but we might miss it, if we’re expecting something grander and louder.

The second thing to notice is how responsible we are in this process. The servants left in charge have to be alert or they'll miss the master's arrival, and that's us. You've heard the expression 'keep your eyes peeled', which is a great description of hyper-attentiveness, when it's important to be ready for anything and we're not sure quite what that might be. If we adopt that fully watchful posture, then we're most likely to see what we need to see and to catch on—it's the inattentive who're most likely to stick with the conventional and miss the creatively new.

Finally, Jesus gives a great big hint about what it is that we're looking out for, but it comes in subtle form—again, we have to be alert or we'll miss it. Might there be some significance in his reference to the timing of the master's arrival: whether at evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn?

You may have caught on already. What happens to Jesus at evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, at dawn? What sequence of events in Jesus' life is being referred to here? Are we being given an entrée here into what the great apocalyptic convulsion of the ages might entail, the great shift of humanity's religious imagination that Jesus brings? Of course the hint about these four watches of the night is immediately revealed in the story of Jesus' passion and death, which follows in Mark's Gospel. Because here is the sacred reimagined, here is sacrifice as violent pacification replaced by sacrifice as loving self-donation, here is the temple torn down in three days only to be rebuilt on new foundations at Easter. Here is the old religion of taking and killing overtaken and put to death by Jesus—who offered himself at evening during the Last Supper, was handed on by Judas at midnight, by Peter at cockcrow, and then to the Romans at dawn. In this drama of self-giving and powerless abandonment the Son becomes the vehicle of a new religious and cultural impulse from God the Father to the world God loves.

Friends, this is what it means to say that Jesus brings the world to judgement. The new religion of self-giving replaces the old order of self-preservation at the expense of others, and this is so strange, so unexpected, so countercultural, that we risk missing it altogether. All the clamouring pundits, all the denialists and blame

shifters, all the snake-oil peddlers who hide behind their agnosticism or atheism, and all the champions of anti-humanist religion, are everywhere staking their claim and capturing our attention. The alertness to which we're called tonight, at the start of Advent, is a call to become used instead to silence, to listening for the unlikely voice, to the cultivation of a discerning heart—to be aware of how our egos run after what may be fascinating and enticing but isn't actually real.

So the message of judgement to the world is a message of conversion to Jesus Christ, away from the false sacred and towards something uniquely humane and humanizing. The source of this conversion, the hinge on which this history turns, is the cross and passion of Jesus, in which human religiousness is turned inside out. Advent recognizes the strangeness and elusiveness of this wisdom, and calls us to listen out for it, because someone has to! And this, friends—simply this—is the Advent calling, the contemplative calling of all the baptised. As Thomas Merton put it in a poem,

We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners,
With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand,
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.

The Lord be with you ...