

**Signs of the Times (Mark 13. 24-37)**

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Benedictus is a community of members drawn from a diversity of religious traditions and for some, no religious tradition. Many of us here exercise a dual citizenship within another parish for our spiritual nurture. For those of us who claim Anglicanism as part of our spiritual heritage, we may be aware of the recent church law developments which has in principle opened the possibility of Church blessing of same sex civil marriages. Within the Uniting Church an uneasy truce has been brokered that does allow same sex marriages and the Pope recently broke new ground with in principle support for same sex unions. But for Anglicans, this issue has already split the church in US, Canada and New Zealand, and threatens to break unity here. Some of us may be bracing ourselves for the reality of schism in one of our spiritual homes. We have come so far, but there is still a ways to go.

Same sex marriage is a polarising topic among spiritually minded folk. I will confess to my own transformation of heart and mind on the matter, the fruit of which is an appreciation that convictions on either side are deeply held and a robust theology, mutual respect and genuine dialogue are fundamental to how we live well together with the issue. In saying that, I'm also mindful of how crazy we Christians appear to my non church going friends, for those who think theology irrelevant and blessings a quaint, archaic optional extra. Christians give the appearance of making a massive fuss over an issue that's an apparent no brainer.

Author of *The Prophetic Imagination* and Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman made an interesting observation into church handling of LGBTIQ matters. In an interview with Krista Tippett on the *On Being* podcast, he said that any conversation on this issue seem to raise adrenalin in the church. His conclusion was that in reality, these issues are about a deeper anxiety about the world not turning out the way we thought it would, that has nothing to do with gays and lesbians.

In the interview he said: *“I think what has happened that we’ve taken all of our anxiety about the old world disappearing and we’ve dumped it on that issue. And so I have concluded that it’s almost futile to have the theological argument about gays and lesbians anymore because that’s not what the argument is about. It’s an amorphous anxiety that we are in free fall as a society. And I think we **are** in free fall as a society, but I don’t think it has anything to do with gays and lesbians, particularly.”*

Brueggeman pinpoints the broader church’s assignment of a scapegoating function to the LGBTIQ community, perhaps we encounter this in our wider lives. For those of us familiar with Girard’s mimetic theory, we are aware that where there is a scapegoat, there is also a false sacred that points to a deeper theological deficiency. I won’t attempt to consider these deficiencies in this reflection, I’m sure all have our theories on that point.

But given today marks the first week of Advent, the season that is looking forward to and preparing for the coming of Christ into the world, I thought framing this reflection on this issue may give us pause for thought. Human sexuality is something we all grapple with, many of us silently and sometimes fearfully, not wanting to hurt others, and more honestly not wanting to hurt ourselves. But sexuality and spirituality have an undeniable relationship that informs how we live with God and each other.

Today’s passage forms a section of Jesus farewell discourse to the disciples on the Mount of Olives, the night before his death. Mark uses rich apocalyptic symbolism as a trope that parallels events in the book of Daniel. So, for example, the cosmic disturbances, the darkening of the sun and moon not giving its light, are an indication that the world is not as it should be. This signifies the coming of the Son of Man coming in clouds, which is a direct reference to Daniel 7:13. The Son of Man reference symbolises of the faithful Israel, which is personified in Jesus and the clouds symbolise the presence of YHWH. The coming of the Son of Man in the clouds is the hope that divine deliverance from current struggles is not far off.

But why would Mark reference Daniel? The book of Daniel was written as an analogy. While the stories in Daniel depict the Babylonian exile, the stories it tells parallels and is written for the persecuted Jewish community under the Seleucid Empire in 167 BCE. Emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes, forbade all religious observance, Jew were forbidden

circumcision, ritual sacrifices, even ownership of the Torah. Mark links this imagery from the book of Daniel to contemporary Jewish persecution under the Roman Empire and those former ages of Jewish oppression. For people in the early church, the Son of Man imagery offered an instantly recognisable trope: we may be living in oppressed times but God will come to break into the world in a new way, just like in Daniel...

But when will this happen? Jesus' reference to the fig tree bearing leaves close to summer is a correlation to another fig tree story in Mark in chapter 11. In this story, Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem and seeks a fig from a leafy tree. Even though it's not fig season, because it's fruitless Jesus curses the tree and says "may no one eat fruit from you again". On face value, this seems a little harsh, as it's not yet fruiting season. But is this really a story about snack time? Maybe not!

The story moves to Jesus's interaction at the Temple with the sellers, the buyers and the money changers, described in Mark as a cave of bandits. What should be a sacred space is filled with robbers. On leaving Jerusalem, Jesus & his disciples observe the fig tree, now withered from its roots. In seven verses Mark has created a metaphor for nation of Israel, now hollow and corrupt, a withered fig tree. In this image Mark draws a line under the authority of the Temple. Reference to a living fig in chapter 13 symbolically says that while the Temple may be dead, Israel still lives on in a new tradition in followers of Jesus. To keep watch, stay alert - things may be hard now, but deliverance is coming.

This is not an easy reflection to write or preach, because in many ways it is personal. But it is what I did feel called to speak on today, perhaps because this year I have journeyed with people who have suffered pain and exclusion, simply for wanting to be themselves. And recognising we live with an institution where in some places, this kind of oppression is considered acceptable, even mandated by God. And wondering is Christ still alive in those places. But then I also think of Martin Luther King who said "*the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*" And I remember that Advent is the season of preparing and waiting for the coming of Christ into the world. And what that might mean for all of us is respect, full inclusion, compassion and forgiveness.

Last week, Sarah drew together the threads of the marks of Benedictus community in the concept of “one love” when she said: *“Our way of being here on earth reveals our alignment with and for eternity”*. This is a community that engages in a particular spiritual practice in which we hope and pray we are being drawn more deeply into relationship with God and with each other. In doing so we offer each and our community a gift that is saying you can be yourself in this space, no need to be anything other than who God made you to be. It is a space in which we are open and making the way to the coming of Christ among us.

**Amen**