

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 33 Year B 2018

One of the dynamics, indeed tension, that continually comes into play in the life of faith is of the extremes of saying too much, or not saying enough; of giving undue emphasis to one thing, or completely ignoring it altogether. Christian theology is often a case of struggling to say enough without saying too much. The issue also plays out around belief in the last things and the second coming of Christ. For many Christians there is an unhealthy interest and obsession in the last things and the second coming of Christ. But others will argue a mere superstition, nothing more than a first century fantasy.

Now, this issue of last things and the coming of Christ is of course what is placed firmly before us in the Gospel today. We hear a tiny portion from a whole chapter dedicated to the subject. The issue is succinctly expressed in our creed: *we believe he will come in glory to judge living and the dead*. A case of saying enough without saying too much. The creed and today's gospel show us that the two possible extremes - of either an unhealthy preoccupation or complete denial - are both *not* possible if we seek to take the gospel and its contents seriously. For sure, of all Mark's Gospel, chapter 13 is probably the most difficult, the most challenging, the most inaccessible for modern, 21st century readers. The ideas behind this part of Mark's Gospel are filled with images and thought forms and world views which are most remote from us. But for first century Jews they would have been perfectly clear and familiar.

All of chapter 13 is an 'apocalyptic' style of writing. If we know anything about this kind of writing, then it is that it so weird and trippy we find it difficult to imagine anything positive about this style of writing. This is unfortunate because ultimately, we are to read a *positive* message into it; there is a positive intent behind it. Principally, this style of writing, including what we hear today - seeks to *give encouragement* to the faithful suffering the evils of the present age. It shows us that there will be a moment of reckoning; that there will come a time of exposure and condemnation of the wicked, and vindication and reward for the faithful. And this is to give us hope, that even if the world seems to be falling apart around us, this chaos and violence and disruption does not have the final and absolute word.

I suspect it is only the very comfortable, mostly the white and well off - those who have not suffered or witnessed or experienced serious wrong - who can so easily dispense with belief in the righteous judgement of God. To those who have suffered in the world's wars and death camps, the victims of dictators and tyrants we can hold out this vision of hope when every other word and sentiment falls short. Hope in an ultimate, divine judgement can give hope to all those for whom human judgement consistently fails and disappoints.

While Mark's Gospel today offers us this word of hope it at the same time is a warning against complacency. The whole chapter is a movement between reassurance and warning. The important little parable of the fig tree holds these two directions together. It tells us: *look around you, read the signs of the times. Be grounded in your reality but don't be so immersed in it all that you cannot discern the patterns and movements unfolding around you.* It's a wonderful example once more of the Gospel keeping us from heading off in extremes. It is good to remember that at the heart of the gospel is a message of hope. The world has enough doomsayers, who desire the end of the world. And there enough who don't take it seriously enough, who say *eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die*, who act as if their lives do not have eternal consequence. And neither of these positions, neither of these extremes allow for the hope-filled vision which lay heart of the Gospel.

Despite the troubles and uncertainties we live with - and will live with - *all will be well.* God is control and Christ will make all things right. That this remains in the realm of mystery is right and proper, because it ought to keep us just that little bit on edge. We need to live a life prepared. We oughtn't take things for granted. We ought to prepare for our own end at any moment, not with fear or terror, but a sense of reality, because an end is coming to us all, and to all things. But we do not look to the future with despair. In Christ we look forward with hope, and our hope will not disappoint us. Amen.