

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 33 Year B 2021

The temptation to extremes - of a complete obsession or unbalanced preoccupation of an issue or belief on the one hand, and denial, indifference or complete unbelief on the other - plays out in many aspects of our life of faith. So often we prefer absolutes and certainty and so skip over the hard and complex work of inhabiting the grey and muddled middle. And so, as I've mentioned before, the whole story of heresy is the story of extremes and exaggerations. It plays out in belief on the reality and presence of the demonic. We might think they are simply sinister fairy stories, or that they are around every corner. We could, indeed, say the same of angels. It plays out on certain moral issues. On the one hand some adopting an 'anything goes' approach, or on the other hand others excluding from the community of faith those who fail to live up to a very narrow view of human perfection. It plays out in certain articles of faith such as the divinity of Christ or the humanity of Christ, where one position is emphasised at the cost of the other. The first 5 centuries of the church's story is really the story of trying to work out that balance. 5 centuries 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 on these questions. We may have heard of a strange class of people called 'preppers': those who are 'preparing' for an end of the world scenario, filling their bunkers with food, supplies and ammunition. They tend to be a certain kind of angry, scary and a little bit crazy rural American, viewing the world with a tragic kind of suspicion and hate. The Jehovah's Witnesses, in their short history, have already half a dozen times formally predicted the end of the world. They have imagined that *they can know the day and the hour*, all of which have come to nothing, and which would hopefully make anyone think at least twice about trusting any of the falsehoods they espouse.

Now, this issue of the last things and the second coming of Christ is of course what is placed firmly before us in the Gospel today. Today we hear a small portion from a whole chapter dedicated to the subject. These articles of faith are succinctly expressed in our creed:

we believe he will come in glory to judge the living and the dead. Again, a case of saying enough without saying too much. The creed, and today's gospel, shows us that the two possible extremes - of either an unhealthy preoccupation or a complete denial - are both *not* possible if we seek to take the gospel and its contents on its own terms. Now, of all of Mark's Gospel, chapter 13 is probably the most challenging and the most inaccessible for contemporary readers. The ideas behind this part of Mark's Gospel are filled with images and thought forms which are mostly remote from us. For first century Jews it would have been perfectly clear and familiar. It's a different story for us.

All of chapter 13 works out of particular genre, a certain kind of writing, which we call 'apocalyptic'. We hear that and certain terrifying (and mostly negative) images come to mind. We might remember the last book of the bible - Revelations - is also called The Apocalypse. And because that book is so weird and trippy, we find it difficult to imagine anything positive about this style of writing. And 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 now suffering the evils of this 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 so a time of vindication and reward for the faithful. And this is to give us *hope*: that even if the world seems to be falling down around us, this chaos and violence and disruption *does not* have the last and final and absolute word.

I suspect it is only the comfortable 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 the victims of persecution or abuse, those who have suffered in the world's wars and death camps, the victims of dictators and tyrants throughout history, we can hold out this vision of hope when every other word and sentiment rings hollow. Faith 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, at the same time it is also a warning against complacency. The whole chapter is a movement between reassurance and warning. The themes we pick up today are of course the themes we will journey with through all of Advent, now just around the corner: of watchfulness, of waiting, of attentiveness. While hope might prompt us to *look up*, watching and waiting might prompt us to *look out*: '*consider the fig tree*'. In other words, *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 doom-sayers, those who desire and would welcome the end of the world. And there are 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, allows for the hope-filled vision which lay at the heart of the Gospel.

The gospel doesn't skip over the challenges and difficulties of life. But it also shows us that the difficulties and troubles we experience *are not* absolute and final. This thread of hope is highlighted when we remember that what we hear today comes *immediately* before Mark's telling of the Last Supper and the passion and death of Jesus. In other words, this word of hope is told us in the shadow of the cross. The Son of Man who is crucified is also the Son of Man *coming in the clouds with great power and glory*. His seeming defeat is turned to ultimate victory. We can only live out our faith through this lens of hope. Despite the troubles and uncertainties we all live with, *all will be well*. God is in 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; that we live a life prepared, that we don't take things for granted, that we might be ready for our own end at any moment. And this not to fill us with fear or terror, but a sense of reality, because an end is coming to us all, and to all things. We do not look to the future with despair. In Christ we look forward with hope, and our hope will not disappoint us. Amen.