

Advent 1 -3rd December 2023

HC BSJ

Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13: 24-end

May I speak, and may you hear, in the name and presence of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, that HIS words might reach our hearts as well as our minds.

Amen

Today, is the first day of the new church liturgical year. We are in year B now (A and C are the alternatives) and many of the readings in the coming months will come from the Gospel according to St Mark. I have put all my commentaries and books on Matthew, on one side rather sadly as I was getting used to him, and now we read Mark's version of events. Rather unhelpfully however, we don't start at the beginning of Mark's gospel, but towards the end – chapter 13 out of 16.

Do have a read of the whole gospel if you can – it isn't long and it moves quickly – ideal for those who love action and can't really be bothered with a slow build up of atmosphere and character! Mark gets going at a pace, and I am looking forward to unpacking it with you over the year.

You know what it feels like when someone gives you potentially catastrophic news –thereafter the actual reality feels almost hopeful?

Well, it's not quite like that here but the feeling one gets if one reads the whole of chapter 13 of Marks Gospel, is similar. The chapter is called The Mini Apocalypse, because, compared to similar interpretations in Revelation, this is like Butlins/ a holiday camp (but not Pontins – poor people).

Jesus has been chatting with his disciples earlier in this chapter, and he points to the massive stones of the temple, the cornerstones, and predicts their collapse. 4 of his followers then want to know when this will happen and what signs and warnings they might get. Jesus doesn't hold back as he warns of vicious rumours, false prophets, and fake messiahs - yet these he says must not alarm them as these are merely signs of the beginning.

Jesus then prophecies the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem, and the consequences for the faithful. NOW, **this IS massive and** alarming. No comfort here. He talks about the end of the world as they know it – and in AD70 that is exactly what happened. The temple is destroyed by Titus and his armies, the

city of Jerusalem is decimated, 1000s of Jews are murdered, and others exiled. The end of the world as they know it indeed. Yet Jesus calls these tumultuous times the 'birth pangs'.

Now as a midwife, it is perhaps easier for me than for most to see birth pangs as something positive – there is no doubt that they are painful, even perhaps agony and seemingly endless, and they are certainly life changing. But they herald a new way of life, a birth of something new and unimaginable.

So reading today's section in context, we see that what Jesus says here actually feels hopeful. Jesus is still describing the end of the world as we know it – but reminds us that this heralds a new order when the Son of Man will come with power and glory. And, although it is sometimes hard in the torrent of apocalyptic language to see it, this is exciting.

Not even Jesus knows the details of when and how this will happen but anyway he is more concerned with *how* we live with the expectation of these events than *when* they will happen.

He tells his followers - you need to keep alert and awake. Jesus is not advocating a life without sleep – impossible as any new parent knows! – but an alertness and keenness of what is going on around us. Anticipation perhaps – like a child on Christmas eve...

What is Jesus telling us about how to live in the in between times?

. 'It is like a man going on a journey who puts his servants in charge, each with his work...' Again we hear a call to do what we are all individually and collectively called to do and be...

Jesus has given us each work to do according to our strengths and expects us to do it. A familiar theme I know but confirmation and continued encouragement to blossom where we are planted!

So what indication do we get from this passage that hope is in the air – that it is not all disaster and catastrophe.

Look at the analogies Jesus uses. The fig tree is showing signs of growth and new life, - its branches become tender and green leaves appear. This shows that SUMMER is near; not the ravages of a freezing cold snowscape as in the

Godless state of a Narnia winter but the comforting welcoming warmth of a fruitful and abundant summer.

And the angels will be sent out to all the ends of the earth to gather in the elect and bring them into heaven – ‘into the presence of God’.

So can we be counted in these elect? Let’s see – do we, Like the writer of the section from Isaiah that we heard earlier, refer to God as our father, and acknowledge that he is the potter who created and shapes us? Do we allow him, as Paul’s followers in Corinth did, to enrich us, to strengthen us and to fill us with grace, as we live in fellowship with each other in the body of Christ Jesus? God is faithful and he longs to welcome us in to his dwelling place. Here he will see us as blameless as his own son into whose life we are baptised.

That sounds like the elect to me.

And so we have HOPE. And this hope is incentive to stay alert and wise, to try not get distracted by false priorities and manipulated messages which diminish humanity and promote fear of the different, but to look for signs of God’s kingdom which are around us; courage, kindness, love, generosity and compassion, – let us allow ourselves to feel that childish anticipation as we look for the Lord’s coming. Let’s live expectantly and hopefully as we wait for the new order – that after the pangs of labour a new way will emerge, and this starts with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. It’s SO Exciting!!