

JOURNEYING THROUGH HOLY WEEK TO EASTER WITH MARK'S GOSPEL

TUESDAY 30 March 2021

Focus your attention on God and become aware again of God's presence with you, and of joining with other worshippers (as in the Introduction to this series).

Thank God for bringing you safely to this day. Ask God to inspire you.

Then read this passage, paying attention to it as you do. What catches your imagination? What puzzles you? How does it make you feel?

Mark 13:28-37 (NRSV)

²⁸ 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Reflection

At the time of Jesus, worship in the Temple was at the heart of Israel's life, and the centre of every Jew's world. When in yesterday's passage [Mark 13:1-2] Jesus talks about not one stone of the Temple being left on another, it must have felt as if their world and, for all they knew, the world as a whole was coming to an end.

Not surprisingly, they wanted to know when it would actually happen [Mark 13:3-4]. Times then were chaotic. There were, and would continue to be, said Jesus, news and fake news of wars, tension between nations, natural disasters and human disaster such as famines. We are still in the same mess. Some people have started to wonder whether God is deluging us with a flood of Covid-19 virus as part of a re-booting of the creation so that it becomes God's Kingdom. Some have started to wonder how they can get a head-start in it all and ensure that they are saved before others.

But the God shown to us by Jesus is not like that. Viruses are one of the downsides to the creativity that God permits in the natural world, just as evil is a flipside to the free-will that God allows us in our human world. The question is not why God sends these things to us, but whether we can discern and relate to God through them, and align ourselves with God's will in them.

Doing that takes a lot of prayer. There are no shortcuts. In Mark chapter 13, Jesus says that you cannot know the day or the hour [Mark 13:32-33]. He implies that every generation will have to work things out and discern what God is doing in the messy circumstances of its own time. In Mark

13:30 he says that the generation of the first listeners to and readers of Mark's gospel will see it all work out in their life-time.

They, though, will not be the only ones. The parable at the end of chapter 13 [Mark 13:34-37] warns everyone in every generation to watch out for what God is doing. There are four precise time references in it: evening, midnight, cockcrow and dawn. These cast their shadow forward to crucial events in the story of Jesus that Mark is about to tell in the following chapters. Conversely, when you know that story, those events cast their shadow back over this parable. The evening is when Jesus comes with his disciples to the Last Supper [Mark 14:17]. The middle of the night is when he goes to Gethsemane and is betrayed by Judas [Mark 14:32-50]. Cockcrow is when Peter denies him [Mark 14:72]. In the morning Jesus is brought to Pilate and eventually condemned [Mark 15:1]. Were they able to see God coming close to them in all these things (interestingly, in Gethsemane Jesus has to keep coming and asking them to keep awake, just like in the parable)? Are we able to see God coming close to us in the story that Mark tells, and in the mess of our lives and of the world in which we live?

We have seen in an earlier reflection that what is true for Jesus as 'Christ' or 'Messiah' will be true in some sense for his disciples. In the following chapters, Jesus will be handed over to councils, and beaten. He will be brought before the Roman governor. He will not say anything until one, crucial moment [Mark 14:62]. In chapter 13, he says that all this will be true for his followers in the story [Mark 13:9-13]. What happens in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul bear witness that it did.

It will also be true for the first hearers of Mark's gospel. It is generally thought that this gospel began to be written down in something like the text as we have it around 69 or 70 AD. Mark 13:14 refers to the 'desolating sacrilege' or 'abomination of desolation' standing where it ought not to be. This is an echo of the Greek version of Daniel 12:11, which refers to the statue of Zeus that the pagan king Antiochus IV Epiphanes set up in the Temple in Jerusalem in 168 BC. In 40 AD, within ten years of the crucifixion, the Roman Emperor Caligula was threatening to set up a statue of himself in the same place. He died before it happened, but in 66 AD the Jews revolted from Rome and war broke out. In 70 AD Jerusalem was captured by Roman troops, who sacrificed to their standards in the Temple and proclaimed Titus as Emperor. The Temple was then destroyed by fire and razed to the ground, never to be rebuilt. Not one stone stood on another.

The words of Jesus in chapter 13 of Mark therefore apply to the story of Jesus himself; to the story of his immediate followers; to the first hearers and readers of the gospel; to every generation since, including ours; and on to any subsequent end of the world. The question for us this week is can we stay awake, are we ready to see God coming close to us in what happens around us?

Prayer

Eternal God, in whose perfect realm
no sword is drawn but the sword of justice,
and no strength known but the strength of love:
guide and inspire all who seek your kingdom,
that peoples and nations may find their security
in the love which casts out fear;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

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The Lord's Prayer