

Our Advent wakefulness campaign

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Advent Sunday Year B – Isa 64 1-9 – Mk 13 24-37

The first few verses of today's Gospel with the stars falling from heaven remind me of a spiritual that The Seekers used to sing – *My Lord, what a morning x3, when the stars begin to fall*. When I looked it up, I discovered the original composers of this spiritual – slaves – used to spell *morning* differently. They meant *mourning*! It makes it an entirely different song doesn't it? Much more in keeping with the apocalypse which unfolding in this chapter 13 of mark's Gospel. Jesus is speaking of the last judgement – where everyone is aware that their end is near. The slaves knew what it was like to have everything they knew turned upside down – to lose entire families and communities. The perspective of that grief – the mourning for so much death – guides what I'll try to convey in today's sermon.

I remember seeing people in the city who wore sandwich boards and carried placards that said '*Repent! The end is near!*' Michael Leunig had a bit of a different angle on this. He drew a cartoon showing a rather disappointed-looking man walking around a city holding a placard which said, *The end of the world is nowhere in sight*. His message wasn't so much in the sign as the look on his face. He was lost. His sign was no message at all. If he'd had something to say that might galvanise people into changing our lives, then his sign-bearing life, his vocation would have had a purpose. He needed a purpose and a goal. Those things help you recognise the gift of what you've got and where you are. They can give you a change of perspective, and that changes everything.

How does your perspective change? Mark has taken us to look at the end of our lives, so let's look at that – how being near death might change our perspective. Approaching the end of our life is a time when perspective *does* change utterly. It's a time when extraordinary healing and blessing can come. It's a time when thoughts and feelings that have been pushed to one side, or left behind, finally catch up. As each of those returning thoughts and feelings arrive – they get inspected, weighed up, maybe polished a bit and admired. They are held compassionately – it's like a last meeting with old acquaintances.

Some of these thoughts and feelings need to be forgiven, before they're put aside. For some of them a reunion is called for – someone must be invited to come. A depth of love or gratitude, or a grudge that's never been properly resolved needs to be dealt with – they all suddenly come into sharp focus. You have to see that person; let them know.

Other returning thoughts and feelings just call for a wry smile, or a sigh, before they can be gently bade goodbye. And this changed perspective, I believe, is God's gift. Suddenly with this perspective – acceptance now that the end is so close – it's easy to deal with all these things. Why couldn't I have done that *before*?

Some people are better prepared for this time than others – they can slip into the work of acceptance and compassion more easily than others. The season of Advent gives us time and encouragement to be like that; to learn this sort of perspective – to get acquainted with it and learn how to practise it; to spring-clean our souls; to keep our inventory of unfinished business short. That's why the focus of our scripture readings for this first Sunday in Advent is not so much on the birth of Jesus, as on his *second* coming.

Commenting on today's apocalyptic passage in Mark's Gospel, the Jewish New Testament professor, Amy-Jill Levine says that

for Jesus, the salient question is not the 'when' of the end time, but the 'how' of living with this expectation. A-J L Mark 114

Yes, Advent calls us to acknowledge that there really is an end, it challenges us to focus not on when it will happen, but on who we need to be if we are to be ready for it.

A major part of this focus in today's reading from Isaiah is dealing with the pain of broken relationship. Our readings face that sort of pain in an entire people. Listen to Isaiah's lament ^{64.7}*God, there's no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you've hidden your face from us, and you've delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.*

Isaiah is crying out to an entire people who've somehow lost the God perspective – people who are living as though the end is nowhere in sight – that they are not responsible for their collective choices. How can they do this!? By this stage in the story, Isaiah is preaching to a people who have experienced exile, but then been returned, free, to Jerusalem. They've seen what the end could look like – they've lived it! But now, when they've got a second chance to rebuild what was lost – rebuild the city; rebuild relationship with God, they don't get on with it. What can it mean that they've known such suffering and such grace, yet somehow switched off? Why weren't they ready; why weren't they awake?

Isaiah cries out – ^{64.7}*There's no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you.* It doesn't take long for people to forget some types of suffering. And in a way, that's a great blessing. But we *do* need to wake up to our mortal frailty, and our emotional and our spiritual selves. In the end – in the *end* – we can't air-condition, or medicate or buy our way out of being mortal, emotional or spiritual. There's work to be done, and there are no labour-saving devices to do that work for us. So in the Church, we set aside Advent each year for learning how to do that work – and for doing as much of it as we can. To learn how to be ready; to learn how to be

awake.

With the end-of-year mania before Christmas and then the nation shutting down for January, we have pretty solid experience of a bizarre annual get-our-lives-in-order-before-it's-all-too-late-time, don't we. It's like a parody of what Advent's for. There's so much expectation piled on to this time from so many different quarters – if you work, there are Christmas break-ups; if you've got kids or grandchildren, there are all the concerts and nativity plays; if you're retired, you don't have any time anyway. This is not what Advent is for.

With such a heap of expectations and deadlines, how *do* you get any time for the spiritual preparation; where's the quiet time to take stock? It'll be different for each of us, but it's a habit we must cultivate. At its simplest level, it's developing a habit of listening; listening intently to what people who love us are *really* saying to us; listening intently for the God who loves us. Maybe that's where we can start our Advent wakefulness campaign for this week. Giving listening some regular scheduled time – and not letting anything else get in the way.

Let's learn from being awake – cherish the moments that God's given us, knowing that each has been a one-off, unique blessing. Let's make Isaiah eat his words, or let's change them to – *There were some who called on God – who took hold of God – and became an inspiration to all who saw!* Let's make this our Advent job. Amen.