

## 2nd Before Advent

Daniel 12:1-3

<sup>1</sup>‘At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people – everyone whose name is found written in the book – will be delivered. <sup>2</sup>Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. <sup>3</sup>Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Hebrews 10:11-25

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup>But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, <sup>13</sup>and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. <sup>14</sup>For by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.

<sup>15</sup>The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

<sup>16</sup>‘This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.’

<sup>17</sup>Then he adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.’

<sup>18</sup>And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

<sup>19</sup>Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup>by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, <sup>21</sup>and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup>let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup>Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup>And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’

<sup>2</sup>‘Do you see all these great buildings?’ replied Jesus. ‘Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.’

<sup>3</sup>As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, <sup>4</sup>‘Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?’

<sup>5</sup>Jesus said to them: ‘Watch out that no-one deceives you. <sup>6</sup>Many will come in my name, claiming, “I am he,” and will deceive many. <sup>7</sup>When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. <sup>8</sup>Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth-pains.

**We really like stories**, and we think of our lives in terms of a story. And part of that liking for story is that we crave resolution to the story. We expect a happy ending, or a sad ending, or an

ironic ending — but we really expect *some sort of ending*. Furthermore, most stories have some sort of enemy or at least obstacle to the hero getting what they want. If you're reading a book by Alistair McLean there is a strong chance that the heroes will outwit and outgun the Nazis, root out the double agent en route, and destroy Schloss Adler as the coup de grace. If this is Jane Austen the enemy is the triple dangers of poverty, eternal spinsterhood, or the wrong man. Elizabeth has to conquer a certain degree of her own pride, and indeed, prejudice before she gets to walk down the aisle with Mr Darcy.

The nation of Israel was, understandably, very interested in the outcome of their nation's story. The book of Daniel is one of many that encouraged them that God had not abandoned them during the Babylonian exile, and that they had a defender in Michael, their guardian angel, and a hope of return. Furthermore, there is promise of an idea that occurs repeatedly throughout the prophets — the Day of the Lord. This is clearly a day in which the Lord declares his place as God over all and establishes his justice over all. A good day, of course, because it is the Lord's day... but these same prophets go on to warn the people about assuming that this is good for them if they do nothing to prove their loyalty to God.

When we move into the New Testament, Jesus never speaks about the Day of the Lord, but one of his main subjects is the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven. A Kingdom in which the Lord is acknowledged as the true God over all, and his justice is completely established. This, clearly is the same thing, but articulated more completely by Jesus. The kingdom of God is, therefore, the happy ending to which Christians are to see history working towards. We are not interested only in our tribe any more, because Jesus has ripped up tribal relationship and replaced this with the sense that we are all his brothers and sisters: children of the one God.

This is the background understanding we need to appreciate what is going on in Mark chapter 13, often referred to as the "Little Apocalypse". We are near the end of Mark's gospel, Jesus and his disciples have been in Jerusalem and are returning to Bethany, to the east of Jerusalem. It is a steep descent down from Jerusalem into the Kidron Valley, before a steep climb up the Mount of Olives. The disciples comment on the grandeur of the additional construction work of the Temple — work that Herod had begun 46 years previously to curry favour with the Jews. Perhaps you can imagine visiting La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, begun 142 years ago and still under construction, only to have your friend tell you that not one stone would be left on top of another. Or perhaps think of what you felt five years ago when you heard that Notre Dame cathedral in Paris was on fire...

So Jesus very soberly tells his disciples that the temple would be destroyed. 'When is this going to be?' they ask, and Jesus does not tell them exactly when, but speaks of false Messiahs, and wars and such like. There is some evidence that Jesus's warning here, repeated frequently during the following years among the growing Christian church, was enough that Christianity suffered no setback when the Jewish revolt that commenced in AD 66 culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem, and the temple, in AD70. Christians had heeded Jesus's warning and fled Jerusalem before that.

Jesus talks continuously in this passage from verse 5 to verse 37 — the longest continuous speech of Jesus in this gospel. His tone changes from his normal way of speech to something different, like as if I, cuckoo-like, should take on Shakespeare's guise and cloak me in the bard's weeds for strange purpose. Now why does he do this?

He does this, I believe because his audience understands the different way of talking that the prophets use, and this poetic, allusive way of talking is appropriate to the moment. He sounds like the book of Revelation. Jesus understands the narratives that people hold in their minds and in their hopes.

Judaism hoped in its more splendid temple, and the prospect that a messiah would lead a revolution against the Romans, throw off their client status, and be truly free once again. Jesus quietly dashes that hope, while warning that Christians are not to pin their Christian hopes on the rise or fall of any nation. Jesus quite simply needed the first generation of Christians to understand, once and for all that his role as Messiah was not linked to the fate of Israel, nor to revolution, and that, while he would establish his kingdom this was not going to be without difficulty, persecution, trouble. Be hopeful, but be realistic is too short a summary of a whole chapter, but it will do.

Now, the disciples and the early Christians then, as now, were only human and were prone to all the fear and anxiety we are. The first generation of Christians feared the Romans who persecuted them for refusing to worship Roman gods; and Jews who considered them heretics. Jesus doesn't lie to them about these fears, but gives them a greater hope. *They* may indeed be persecuted, but they will not only find heaven when they die, but their cause, the Kingdom of God, will succeed.

What are our fears as Christians? We may have all sorts of fears about war in the middle east and Ukraine spreading into another world war, we may be anxious about the cost of living, anxious about artificial intelligence eroding our trust in the possibility of truth and reality, or just worried that our kids will be ok. But our fears as Christians, about our faith tend to centre on whether our faith, and our church will die out. Will they lock up the church after I've gone? Because our fear as Christians *in this country* is that our faith will simply fall extinct through a lack of interest, a belief that stories about a man rising from the dead are irrelevant nonsense, and that despite all our protests, the world will consider itself to have moved on, proud of its sophisticated realism or some such baloney.

But I think that Mark, here in chapter 13, gives us one of many reassurances. Temples may fall down, but faith goes on. Church buildings may even close, but that is not the end of all we've worked and prayed for. His kingdom *is* coming, and neither persecution nor disinterest will conquer it.

I began by saying that we live through stories, our stories have some form of enemy or obstacle, and we need a sense of resolution to our stories. Jesus promised his disciples and promises us not easy, empty triumphalism, but the real, credible coming of his kingdom, with justice and goodness, and that means that the good you do in his name and in response to his love for you will never be inconsequential, will never be forgotten, and will have its fulfilment when he returns.

Amen.