

## Sermon for November 27, 2011

Today's gospel reading reminds you and me that, at advent, we await both the coming of the incarnate God in the child of Bethlehem, and the glorious Son of Man who will return at the end of time. Throughout the gospel—and especially in Mark 13—there is the clear reminder that what begins in Galilee will end with the triumph of Jesus, Messiah, Son of God.

The passage which Anna-Claire just read carries with it all the power and all the promises of apocalyptic literature. The Jesus whom Mark presents predicts the signs that will accompany the end of human history—the woes from which we, the faithful, should move away, and the return which we should welcome.

Such apocalyptic discourse permeates both Jewish literature of the early centuries of our era and early Christian literature. Apocalyptic literature is subject to abuse. All of us have heard predictions of the end of the world—readings of signs that turn this or that nation into the ancient enemy; promises that this or that historical event is clear evidence that the end is at hand.

You and I need to notice how carefully Mark's gospel cautions us about this kind of reading of history. In the first place, Jesus himself warns that no one knows the exact day and hour of the end of time—not the angels, and not even Jesus himself. In the second place, the language of apocalyptic is presented in poetry, and in metaphor. The images of the fig tree and the man who goes on a journey symbolize the clear confidence that God is in charge of history. The worst of circumstances or the most villainous of tyrants can't outdo or undo God's hand in history. What the images symbolize is the confidence that the shape of history can be discerned in Jesus Christ. The promise to which history moves is the promise of Jesus Christ, Messiah, Son of God.

Whether or not we await him to appear literally on the clouds, what we are invited to believe at advent is that history moves toward him. The whole apocalyptic discourse ends with a parable—again a reminder that to try to read this material as if it presented literal and measurable signs of the end is to misread it. The parable stresses the ethical implications of the life lived in hope of the end of time. Apocalyptic hope should inspire us to work and to declare that the glory of Christ is the hope of the world, and that our responsibility as believers is to live out that hope, wide-awake.

At the eucharist we say:    "Christ has died;  
                                  Christ has risen;  
                                  Christ will come again."

For most of us, I suspect, the certainty of the affirmation diminishes as the list goes on;

of crucifixion, there is no doubt; of resurrection, some; of return, considerable. You and I can affirm that history is in God's hands, and that the shape of history is outlined in the story of Jesus Christ. We can affirm that we all live in expectation, first of our own end, and finally the great end when our story and all of history are caught up into the triumph of God.

We can affirm that we live responsibly. In the light of the end that God writes to each of our lives, and the end that God will write to human history, we are to be careful, watchful, and loving. We are to wake up, or our lives will pass us by and we will miss them—miss the story, miss our role. We are to wake up, lest history becomes something that simply happens to us: not the drama we ourselves can help to shape. However modest our stewardship of our own story and of human history, we are called to be alert, to be on the watch, to take charge.

As this new church year begins, as in every year before, we will be called to live in hope, and to be responsible for our relationships to God, to one another, and to God's creation.

Mary Lewis