

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8; Psalm 80 (79); 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!

Mark 13:32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

Mark 13:33 [Jesus said:] “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34 It 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. 35 Therefore, 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, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In the narrative of Mark, chapter 13 stands between Jesus’ presence and disputations in Jerusalem (chapters 11-12) and the Passion Narrative (chapters 14-16). Chapter 13 is often called the Markan Apocalypse or the Little Apocalypse. The lectionary omits v. 32 but it is included here because it makes a more natural introduction to the warnings. If even the Son does not know, then *a fortiori* the disciples need to be on the watch.

The writing here is apocalyptic, which requires very careful handling (see below). Apart from that, the threatening tone could grate on our ears today. In general, apocalyptic is meant neither to be a prophecy nor a description of the future. It interprets the *present* and tries to promote fidelity and steadfastness. Mark is facing three situations: (i) it is probable that the communities for which the Gospel was written had experienced tribulation of some kind, with the consequent temptation to give up; (ii) complacency engendered by the apparent delay in Jesus return; (iii) feverish identification of the signs of the end. For Mark, the tribulations are the birth pangs of the end; his teaching is an invitation to be both steadfast and alert.



In Mark’s narrative, the location is the Mount of Olives in view of the Temple (Mark 11:11, 15–16, 27; 12:35); the topic takes up issues anticipated Jesus’s arrival in the Temple (11:1-10) and his judgment of it (12:1-11); the audience—Jesus, Peter, James, John and Andrew—reminds us of the opening scene of the Galilean ministry (1:16-20).

KIND OF WRITING

This is written in apocalyptic language. The best Old Testament example is the book of Daniel and the best New Testament example is the Apocalypse, the book of Revelation. In general, an apocalypse interprets the present and, so to speak, “names the times we live in.” On foot of the description, certain attitudes or actions are taught, to help us live these times in an authentic way. The great virtues are steadfastness (stickability!) and watchfulness.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The biblical background for Mark 13 as a whole is the book of Daniel 7-12.

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Beginning again is an invitation to look in two directions. What happened for me in the last year, both in my ordinary life and in my life as a believer, a person of faith? For what do I ask forgiveness? For what do I give thanks? We also look forward and the new beginning gives us a chance to start again on the Way of discipleship. Both thanksgiving and renewal are to be found in today’s readings. The Gospel is an invitation to wake up, to keep watch, to live fully the present moment under God, in whom we live and move and have our being. Amen.

PRAYER

Wake us up, O God, and rouse us from the slumber of the everyday that we may recognise you in every moment and in every person, today and every day of our lives.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(1) Context in Mark: it may help to notice that there are good links between all of chapter 13 and (i) the initial preaching of Jesus in Mark 1:14; (ii) the proclamation of the Kingdom in parables in Mark 4:1-34; and (iii) the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane in Mark 14:32-42.

(2) Mark 13 itself: the evangelist has gathered together disparate items of Jesus’ teaching. It is likely that a certain amount of grouping of sayings had already taken place. We may notice some of the following similar themes:

- (a) Sayings on the distress of Israel: 14-18, 19-20
- (b) Sayings on the distress of the church: 9-13
- (c) Sayings on pseudo-messiahs and the true Messiah: 21, 14-16
- (d) Sayings on the *parousia* and watchfulness: 26-27, 34-36.

Mark was writing at the time of the Jewish war with the Romans and end-time expectations were really high, in Palestine and elsewhere. He may have gathered the statements of Jesus together for the community at that time, to maintain alertness of spirit and to warn against potential false messiahs and the like. In its present state the chapter falls naturally into the following sections:

- (1) vv. 1–4, Introduction—prophecy of the temple’s doom and the disciples’ question;
- (2) vv. 5–23, the Tribulation of Israel and of the Church;
- (3) vv. 24–27, the *parousia* of the Son of Man and the Gathering of the People of God;
- (4) vv. 28–37, the Times of Fulfilment and Exhortations to Watchfulness.

Our excerpt comes from the very last section, inculcating certain attitudes for now. It thus makes a bridge with there feast of Christ the King and prepares us for the season of Advent, with a tone of expectation, hope and preparation.

ST PAUL

1 Thessalonians 4:15-5:11 is very close to the atmosphere of Mark 13. It is a little too long to quote, so here is a shorter similar passage from Romans:

And do this because we know the time, that it is already the hour for us to awake from sleep, for our salvation is now nearer than when we became believers. The night has advanced toward dawn; the day is near. So then we must lay aside the works of darkness, and put on the weapons of light. Let us live decently as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in discord and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to arouse its desires. (Romans 13:11–14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 32 Some of the force of the warning comes from the Son himself not knowing. Of course, this is a surprise

to us today. However, there is preparation in Mark 10:40. Furthermore, as the early Christians tended to underline and even increase Jesus’ knowledge, this saying is most likely original, in some form, to Jesus himself. In later theological disputes, the Arians used this text against the affirmation of Jesus as true divine and truly human, as defined at the Council of Nicea (AD 325).

Verse 33 Mark is teaching “watchfulness,” conscious living and engagement. It is a frequent idea in this chapter (vv. 5, 9 and 23). “Watch” makes the necessary with Gethsemane and the destiny of Jesus.

Verse 34 This little parable gives a very ordinary everyday example and has a tendency to allegory: the man on the journey represents the Lord; the slaves / servants stand for the believers; the doorkeeper could be any disciple, with the special duty of watchfulness; the return of the master point to the Second Coming.

Verse 35 The final expansion spells it out very clearly, naming the potential times when the master may return. Mark, interestingly, uses the Roman divisions of the hours of the day, a clue to the world of reference of the community.

Verse 36 Sleep is commonly used to mean inattention, lack of alertness, as well as death. “Suddenly” adds intensity to the sense of threat involved.

Verse 37 This is the last sentence of the Little Apocalypse and makes a resounding conclusion, addressed explicitly to each and to all. Watch is taken up again in the next chapter: 14:34, 37, 38.

Today we cannot excite artificially the feverish expectation of the early Christians. Probably we do not want to threaten people either. Nevertheless, the culture is a culture of distraction and it promotes unconscious living, inviting us to live on the surface and to be happy with the merely material. Perhaps there is an entry in that for the teaching of this passage. See the prayer below. We were not intended to sleepwalk through life!!

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The coming of the master is not just the moment of death, but any moment of grace. Recall unexpected graces — good things that happened when they were not anticipated.
2. Recall times when you were particularly alert and aware of what was going on in you and around you and the contrast with moments when such alertness and awareness were not present.
3. The servants were given charge of the household “each with their own job.” Identify with the servants as people given a responsibility within the household of God’s people. What has it been like for you when you have been shown trust in this way by another person? What is it like for you to see yourself trusted in this way by God?
4. Your experience of good “doorkeepers,” people who were there and ready to receive you even when you came at an awkward or unexpected time. Also your experience of being a good “doorkeeper” for another.
5. Jesus says that what he is saying to his disciples he is saying to all. Have there been times when you have been a messenger of hope to others, encouraging them to wait for a moment of grace. Who have been the ones to encourage you?

PRAYER

Rend the heavens and come down, O God of all the ages!

Rouse us from sleep, deliver us from our heedless ways, and form us into a watchful people, that, at the advent of your Son, he may find us doing what is right, mindful of all you command.

Grant this through him, whose coming is certain, whose day draws near, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.



Advent Readings				Themes	
Advent 1	Is 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8	Ps 80 (79)	1 Cor 1:3-9	Mk 13:33-37	End of Time
Advent 2	Is 40:1-5, 9-11	Ps 85 (84)	2 Pet 3:8-14	Mk 1:1-8	John the Baptist
Advent 3	Is 61:1-2, 10-11	Magnificat	1 Thess 5:16-24	Jn 1:6-8, 19-28	John the Baptist
Advent 4	2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11,16	Ps 89 (88)	Rom 16:25-27	Lk 1:26-38	Mary

God will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ

1 Corinthians 1:1 *From Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Sosthenes, our brother, 2 to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called to be saints, with all those in every place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. 3* Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

4 I always thank my God for you because of the grace of God that was given to you in Christ Jesus. 5 For you were made rich in every way in him, in all your speech and in every kind of knowledge — 6 just as the testimony about Christ has been confirmed among you— 7 so that you do not lack any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. 8 He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into fellowship with his son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In Advent, all three readings focus on the same topic and so today, with Paul, we reflect on the end of time, the last day. Paul mentions the “revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ”, the “end”, and the “day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The faithfulness of God is also a key part of that apocalyptic worldview. Vv. 1-2 (added above) complete the greeting.

KIND OF WRITING

(i) This is a thanksgiving, present in all Paul’s letters except Galatians. He uses the thanksgiving to gain the attention, good will and receptivity of the Corinthians, by praying for them and by praising their strengths (which, it turns out, can also be weaknesses!).

(ii) At the same time, this passage displays Paul as an apocalyptic Jew of the first century. Apocalyptic is both a kind of writing and worldview. Central to this worldview is the hope in God’s faithfulness and consequent belief in the resurrection, however that may be imagined. The term apocalyptic and the worldview may seem foreign to us. However, it is a response to the question present in all faiths: how to continue believing in God with so much evil and suffering in the

world.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

It is known that Paul was in Corinth in the winter of AD 51 and the spring of 52. The letter is long because there are major issues in the Corinthian community, some of which are hinted at in this introductory thanksgiving. For example, he mentions competitiveness over the spiritual gifts (ch. 12-14) and their inability to believe or imagine that all will rise Christ at the end (ch. 15).

RELATED PASSAGES

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also came through a man. For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ, the first fruits; then when Christ comes, those who belong to him. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he has brought to an end all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be eliminated is death. (1 Corinthians 15:20–26)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 3 The greeting is pointed to the specific needs in Corinth: grace because all is gift, peace because of rivalry. Some Corinthians gave themselves a higher status because of the spiritual gifts.

Verse 4 This typical introductory line is replicated elsewhere (1 Thessalonians 1:2; Romans 1:3 etc.). To know that someone prays for you is very heart-warming. However, even at the start, Paul already anticipates the idea that their gifts are *not* their own, but come through the grace of God.

Verse 5 This is especially true in Corinth, where the spiritual gifts are evidently abundant and prized. For Paul’s considered reply, see chs. 12-14.

Verse 6 Why does he mention “testimony”? The noun is rare in Paul (only here and in 2 Corinthians 1:12), while

the verb is more common (Romans 3:21; 10:2; 1 Corinthians 15:15; 2 Corinthians 8:3; Galatians 4:15)? Possibly because in this letter Paul draws down the teaching *tradition* to remind the Corinthians. See the Lord’s Supper in 11:23-26 and the resurrection creed in 15:3-5.

Verse 7 Notice that the spiritual gifts, to which they are so attached, are not intended to last for ever. On the contrary, as we read further on: *But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.* (1 Corinthians 13:8). Instead, they are given *with a view to the end*, the revealing (literally the *apocalypse*) of Jesus. The end includes the resurrection of the body, a teaching which was difficult even then for some in the community.

Verse 8 Again, we notice that this strengthening is gift in view to what will happen at the end of time. It is implied—none too subtly—that the Corinthians need help to become/remain blameless.

Verse 9 The faithfulness of God is a key teaching of apocalyptic in general and Paul in particular. See Romans 3:21-26 in the NET translation. Again, the comment on fellowship (*koinōnia*; Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:16; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Galatians 2:9; Philippians 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Phlm 1:6) is at the heart of a Paul’s teaching, yet critically missing in Corinth.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Looking at your own community of faith and indeed your being part of it, for what do you give thanks? What are the gifts God has bestowed on the community as a whole and on the individuals within it?

2. We are called into fellowship with others. Can I name what I receive as part of that fellowship and give thanks? Can I say—humbly!—what I bring to our fellowship?

3. God is faithful: perhaps at this point in my life, I need to be reminded of that? Perhaps I need to look at my own faithfulness and how I live it?

PRAYER

Faithful God, stay with us on the journey that we try to be faithful just as you are faithful, so that on the day of Lord Jesus Christ you may welcome us into fellowship with all the saints. Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, you the potter

Isa 63:16 For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name. 17 Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.

Isa 64:1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— 3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. 5 You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. 6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7 There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. 8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is a very heart-felt prayer, expressing considerable distress, at a time when people were wondering (not for the last time) where is God is all of this?

KIND OF WRITING

The writing is typical of biblical poetry this time in the form of a psalm of lament, running from Isaiah 63:7 to 64:12. Again, the poetry can be enjoyed for its technique of saying things twice. Notice the relationship, for example, between these pairs of lines (parallelism, technically):

63:17 Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways *and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?*

The second line often goes a bit deeper, into the cause of the straying: they did not ever fear / respect God, not to men-

tion pray to him.

64:7 There is no one who calls on your name, *or attempts to take hold of you.*

Again, the second line goes deeper: they are not even trying!

The lectionary excerpt has a frame, at the start and at the end: “you are our Father.” This initial title expands into a wonderful description of God and those who believe in God. Notice that there are two panes or dimensions each time.

GOD	ISRAEL
Lord, redeemer from of old, the liberator God of the Exodus (64:1-4), without equal, the potter	God’s servants, the tribe of God’s heritage, those who wait for him, those who right and remember God’s way.
God made the stray and hardened their hearts; God was angry and hid himself; God hid his face and delivered them to their enemies.	They strayed and no longer feared God; they sinned and transgressed; filth and unclean, faded like a leaf; iniquitous; no one calls on God

The surprise in all this is that it is *God* who is invited to “convert”!! God has to take some of the blame and the hope is that he will let his true self be seen again. The Hebrew word for “turn” is *shuv* and the range of meanings includes to turn around, to repent, to bring back, to refresh. When used of God it means to become devoted once more. It shows a certain courage to address God in these terms.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Second Isaiah (ch. 40-55) was written during the Babylonian Exile (587-539 BC) and Third Isaiah (ch. 56-66) after the return from Exile. The omitted verses 18 and 19 give us to understand that this prayer was written *after* the return from Exile but *before* the rebuilding of the Temple. It was a time of hopes dashed and not at all unlike later historical moments in the life of the church.

RELATED PASSAGES

Woe to you who strive with your Maker, earthen vessels with the potter! Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, “What are you making?” or “Your work has no handles?” (Isaiah 45:9)

Like clay in the hand of the potter, to be moulded as he pleases, so all are in the hand of their Maker, to be given whatever he decides. (Sirach 33:13)

Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? (Romans 9:21)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 16 Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (=Israel) are the physical “fathers”, but God is the real father of his people.

Verse 17 God is, in part, blamed for the present painful experience. NB 17cd.

Verse 1 Echo of the covenant on Sinai. “Tear” because of God’s urgency.

Verse 3 “We did not expect” points to the grace, the gift of the Exodus.

Verse 4 Body language for the “beyond” of God.

Verse 5 The first two lines are positive; the second two negative.

Verse 6 Graphic description of the present decline and instability.

Verse 7 Again, the first two lines describe the state of things, while the second two lines pinpoint the cause.

Verse 8 An echo the second creation story in Genesis 2-3.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Believers often long for a more tangible presence of God, a God who comes to meet us. What has been my experience of waiting for God?

2. Clay can be made into many things (see Rom 9:21). How open am I to God’s creativity in my own pilgrimage of faith?

PRAYER

God, our loving father, when we are absent from you and when you seem absent to us, come again, be close to us, and let us know your presence and action in our lives. We place ourselves in your hands: we are the clay, you the potter. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8; Psalm 80 (79); 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

READINGS 1 AND 3

To be honest, the first reading doesn't quite fit the Gospel as neatly as usual. Vv. 3-5 come closest, with the tone of not expecting and still waiting. How the waiting should unfold is found in v. 5: doing what is right, remembering his ways, in some fashion corresponding to the Gospel message "to stay awake."

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

There is a perfect fit between Isaiah and Psalm 80 (79). Psalm 80 mentions the catastrophic situation (vv. 5, 6, 12-13 and 16). It addresses God as shepherd of his people (v. 1) and vineyard owner (vv. 8-16). Finally, it calls on God to restore Israel, in the refrain: *Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8

In this reading, written at a time of failed reconstruction, there is a frank acknowledgement that something has "gone wrong" in life and in relationship with God. What the prophet says is poetically expressed but very insistent.

Second reading

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Paul had a mixed relationship with the Corinthians. Nevertheless, here he thanks God for them and names the special gifts they have. He concludes with a prayer that they may remain steadfast in the faith, just as God himself is faithful to them.

Gospel

Mark 13:33-37

Advent begins with a wake up call. In our culture of busy-ness and distraction, there may be something here for us today.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 30 November

St Andrew apostle

Romans 10:9-18

Paul is convinced that the Word of God

is very near to us, "in our hearts and on our lips." We need, nevertheless, bearers of that Word, more than ever...perhaps I could be a carrier myself?

Matthew 4:18-22

As usual in the call stories, human things that would interest us—how did their wives and children feel?—are left out and we stand before the sovereign call of Jesus. Have I heard that call in my own life?

Tuesday 1 December

Isaiah 11:1-10

The human hope for harmony is portrayed in this reading as a harmony in nature itself, even among the most unlikely animals.

Luke 10:21-24

Jesus pronounces a remarkable prayer in today's gospel, a very encouraging prayer: we all stand before the mystery and mercy of God, thank God!

Wednesday 2 December

Isaiah 25:6-10

This reading is familiar from funerals, but not confined to those sad occasions. On the contrary, the invitation, open all the time, is full of joy and hope.

Matthew 15:29-37

The compassion of Jesus is outstanding in this reading: it is *he* who names the need and supplies the food. What hunger does he identify in us today? How are we nourished by him?

Thursday 3 December

St Francis Xavier, priest and religious

Isaiah 26:1-6

As you listen, you may notice all the words to do with protection: strong city, gates, rock, citadel, forming a great call to faith and trust in God.

Matthew 7:21, 24-27

It is always tempting to think that once you've said your prayers, you're done. The prophets regularly pillory such complacency and so does Jesus. In addition, awareness of local geography adds over to his words. In the Judean desert, there are dry river beds called *wadis*,

subject to flash floods. To build on such an exposed foundation is the very height of foolishness.

Friday 4 December

St John of Damascus, priest and doctor



Isaiah 29:17-24

As often in the Bible, there are promises to the deaf, the blind and the poor. Each of us is precisely dead, blind and poor and so the message is for us all today, if only we would pay attention. We hold fast to conviction that the Lord is our light and our help.

Matthew 9:27-31

Miracle stories, like today's, are always meant to be taken at two levels. Rather than wonder about the past, we could ask in the present, how am I blind? What is my need of the gift of sight which comes with faith?

Saturday 5 December

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26

The prophet raises the hopes of his hearers with a grand vision of peace and prosperity, a gift of God himself. Such harmony and well being come from following the way offered by God. *Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.* (Psalms 1:2-3)

Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5, 6-8

Again, it is the compassion of Jesus which is outstanding. He feels and he acts and he sends out. Our need for the word of compassion and the healing touch of God is great. Perhaps I too am being called to some ministry in the community of faith or in society at large?