

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16 (15); Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; Mark 13:24-32

But about that day or hour no one knows, but only the Father

Mark 13:24 [Jesus said:] “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Mark 13:28 “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. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven 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.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Next Sunday, the feast of Christ the King, is the last Sunday of the current liturgical year B (Mark). On the first Sunday of Advent, year C (Luke) starts.

At the close of the liturgical year, the readings turn to the end of time, a theme which forms a bridge with the first Sunday of Advent, which begins (!) with the end of time.

KIND OF WRITING

All of Mark 13 is “apocalyptic”, a type of writing which is highly symbolic and can be difficult to decipher. Normally, apocalyptic writings are written for faith groups—Jewish or Christian—who are under pressure or persecution of some kind. The message is usually an assurance that the future really is in God’s hands, in spite of appearances, and not to lose faith. “Endurance” is the key virtue, expressed in Mark with the



Christ the Pantocrator
(Monastery of Daphni, Athens)

command to stay awake.

The apocalyptic writings usually try to unmask the apparent omnipotence of the (current) empire. Mark 13 seems, in part, to have been written up in the light of the threatened or real destruction of Jerusalem, when the Romans would raise their idolatrous standards in the Temple itself.

At the time of writing, the death and resurrection of Jesus were interpreted as part of the end, the first instalment: *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.* (1 Cor 15:20)

Mark 13 has a particular outline which can help us to follow this long speech.

Setting the scene: :13:1-3

A. *When?* (13:4a)

B. What will be the sign? (13:4b)

B* Signs and non-signs (13:5-27)

Non-signs (13:5-23)

One reliable sign (13:24-27)

A* Only God know’s *when* (13:28-37)

Our particular passage cuts across 13:24-27 and 13:28-37. In general, Mark is saying that no historical or political event can be taken as an unequivocal indication of the end. The disciples must be content with (a) not knowing,

Thought for the day

Our expression “to have time for someone” is a heart-warming one, because giving time to someone is a real gift of myself, part of our consciousness of being human. The opposite—lack of time—is expressed in another idiom “Money rich but time poor.” To be poor in time is a great deprivation, even when self-inflicted. It is all a question of perspective, values and choices. We do need to value the fleeting time we have and not live only towards a future, as yet unreal, moment. In the words of St Paul, *Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation!* (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Prayer

Help me, eternal God, to accept your gift of the present moment. It is the only moment I will ever have, so let me inhabit it richly and fully, and celebrate your gift of life in abundance.

just as Jesus himself did not know and (b) suffering, again just as Jesus himself did, as we see in this text:

“As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Mark 13:9–13)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There are lots of Old Testament texts which could be used – but perhaps the most relevant would be Daniel 7, which used the language of “Son of Man”. In Daniel, “son of man” means a human being who will be God’s agent

of final salvation. On the lips of Jesus, the term is used to identify himself (only) and has a strong connection with the coming of God's reign.

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man 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. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. (Dan 7:13–14, NRSV adjusted)

This passage is alluded to by Jesus at his trial:

But [Jesus] was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.'" Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death. (Mark 14:61–64)

Jesus calls himself "Son of Man" very frequently in Mark: Mark 2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21, 41, 62.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

There are links with the proclamation of Jesus, his death and his resurrection:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14–15)

And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." (Mark 9:1)

Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Mark 11:9–10)

Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." (Mark 14:25)

Joseph of Arimathea, a respected mem-

ber of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. (Mark 15:43)

ST PAUL

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thess 4:13–18)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 24 The reference is to the Last Day: The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. (Joel 2:10)

Verse 25 Earthquake is a symbol, in the Bible, of God's presence and also of the end of time.

Verse 26 See Dan 7:13 and Mark 14:61.

Verse 27 The elect (Mark 13:20, 22, 27) are the faithful who have gone through the time of testing.

Verse 28 A lesson from nature to read the signs of the times.

Verse 29 The sense of urgency was very present in Paul (see above). Twice Mark says the end will be within the lives of some present (9:1 and here in v. 30).

Verses 30 The present generation: by the time Mark comes to write, the extreme urgency must have weakened. For example, 9:1 seems to point immediately to the Transfiguration. Certain features within Mark 13 suggest that Mark is not so much pointing to the future as interpreting the death and resurrection of Jesus. In that sense, this generation, had not passed away before these things had come to pass.

Verse 31 Apocalyptic sees the end of the creation as we know it. In astonishing contrast, the words of Jesus will outlast the universe.

Verse 32 This is surely historical because the tendency, as time went on, was to increase the foreknowledge of Jesus. The reader needs to read the rest of Mk 13 to make sense of this ending; "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." (Mark 13:32–37)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus speaks of the established order falling apart, but the collapse of the old order opened the way for new possibilities. When have you seen something new and hopeful emerge after the collapse of something that you had expected to endure much longer, perhaps even forever?
2. The parable of the fig tree. Even in winter it begins to put forth leaves which give a hint of the fruit to come. Where have you found signs of hope in a wintry situation – in your own life, in the life of some group, in the life of the Church?
3. Jesus proposes no clear time-scale for the events being foretold, so the final sentence (v. 32) is a call to alertness, to live the present to the full. What different does it make to you when you are able to live the present moment to the full?

PRAYER

Your creation, O God, runs its appointed course; as far as the ends of the earth you gather a people you call your own. Confirm us in the strength of your abiding word. Steady our hearts in the time of trial, so that on the day of the Son of Man, we may without fear rejoice to behold his appearing. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

By a single offering Christ has perfected those who are sanctified

Heb 10:11 And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” 13 and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 *And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,* 16 “*This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,*” 17 *he also adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”*

18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

How can we speak of salvation today, what words can we find for it? At a superficial reading, Hebrews seems to affirm the Western tradition of *redemption*, taking the death of Jesus to be a propitiation, a payment of a blood sacrifice. A closer reading takes us to another level. The levitical priesthood, in the writer’s view, has indeed come to an end, to be replaced by an older, more significant priesthood, that of the somewhat elusive Melchizedek. At the heart of it all stands Jesus’ *obedience*, which is this author’s reception of Jesus’ *faith/faithfulness*. By the double action of Jesus’ communion with all human beings (through suffering) and the offering of his faithfulness (again through suffering), Jesus’ established the new, everlasting covenant. The key for us today is words like solidarity and faithfulness. Jesus’ solidarity with us, and his total faithfulness to his identity and mission, disclose the faithfulness of God (see Romans 3:21-26, in the NET version at www.bible.org).

KIND OF WRITING

The writer is employing a combination of midrash and typology. The citations from the Hebrew Bible always have probative force to the NT authors. In particular, Psalm 110—cited so much in the New Testament—was taken at the time to be a messianic psalm. Thus, its use here is especially appropriate.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

To understand this short passage, the full section Heb 9:23-10:18, ought to be read.

RELATED PASSAGES

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to *appear in the presence of God* on our behalf. (Hebrews 9:24)

When he had made purification *for sins*, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (Hebrews 1:3b-4)

The Lord says to my lord, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.” (Psalms 110:1)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; *for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.* (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 11 The writer has switched from high priest to simply priest, so as to illustrate the daily functioning of the Temple. Again, the chief idea is that whatever requires repetition must of necessity be less than perfect. Hence the conclusion that such sacrifices are incapable of taking away sins. At this point, the writer is not immediately concerned with *how* this happened but rather with its effectiveness. The word “service” is literally *leitourgōn*, i.e. an act of public benefit.

Verse 12 The NRSV inserts “Christ” here to make sure we understand who

the “he” is. The JB in the lectionary retains the ambiguity of the original. The contrast been the one (perfect) and the repeated (imperfect) is sustained. The expression “for sins” is here generic. Cf. Heb 1:3-4 above. “For all time” is problematic if it is taken with offered. In Greek it stands between the words sacrifices and sat. Its meaning is without interruption. It goes better, perhaps, with “sat down”, conveying the sense of a period of sitting at God’s right hand, before the very end. Cf. 1 Cor 15:25-26.

Verse 13 This verse continues the idea of a period of session, characterised here as waiting. Cf. 1 Cor 15:25-28, in dialogue with the same Psalm 110. This is not, however, passive waiting but rather expectant, engaged anticipation.

Verse 14 The offering in this case is Jesus’ death, understood here as his total obedience and trust in God. The writer plays with the analogy of OT sacrifices but in the final analysis the dissimilarity is more significant than similarity. Access to God, formerly the preserve of the high priest is now open to everyone on account of Jesus’ action. Christ has continual access and so do all who believe in him. To make holy and to perfect are used interchangeably in Hebrews, a use consonant with the outlook of the writer.

Verses 15-17 Proof from Scripture; the reference is to the whole passage Jer 31:31-34, given above.

Verse 18 In Greek, this verse has no verb, giving it an aphoristic feel. It reiterates the teaching of the whole section.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The passage invites personal reflection on the events of salvation and how I understand them today.
2. Sins, of course, continue, but we approach the throne of grace confidently because of God’s forgiveness in Christ.

PRAYER

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake

Dan. 12:1 “At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Although there are earlier hints in Isaiah and Ezekiel, this is the earliest evidence for the resurrection of the dead in the Hebrew Bible. Even though quite brief, the text has a special importance because it helps us to understand where the doctrine came from and, in part, what it meant then or could mean today. The elusive brevity of the passage presumes a wider context of understanding.

KIND OF WRITING

John J. Collins once offered a useful thumbnail sketch of apocalyptic writings, as follows.

An apocalypse is “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” To this may be added that the genre normally serves “to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority.”

There were two types of apocalypse, the journey apocalypse and the vision apocalypse. Both Daniel and Revelation belong to the vision type. The journey type is the more common in the literature.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Daniel, which come to us a bilingual text, is in two clear parts. The first part—1-6—offers various tales of how to serve as a faithful Jew in the Diaspora. Daniel and his companions illustrate Jeremiah’s rather weary advice to the exiles, But seek the welfare of the

city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:7)

Dan 7-12, on the other hand, offers a series of visions, designed to encourage the faithful under immense pressure.

RELATED PASSAGES

There are texts which provide a seed ground for the development of this doctrine.

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead. (Is 26:19 — probably to be read metaphorically, like Ez 37).

The non-biblical Book of Enoch provides some parallels which antedate Daniel.

Blessed are you, righteous and elect ones, for glorious is your portion. the just will be in the light of the sun; the elect in the light of eternal light. The days of their life will have no end. The saints will have innumerable days. (1 Enoch 58:2-3)

For the judgment scene, cf:

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. (Dan 7:9–10)

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

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The time is the moment when Antiochus invaded Israel. Michael: in Dan 10:21, we have the first mention of

this figure, so important in later piety and culture. This great prince is the conceived as the angel of the presence, representing God himself. The increased angelology grew out of a desire to protect the transcendence of God and posit intermediaries. Michael, which means “Who is like God?” is a play on words. The role of this prince is that of judge or arbiter. The idea that there are records confirms the sense of final assessment or making up of accounts.

Verse 2 Just to be exact, Daniel does not speak of universal resurrection of all. However, it is unequivocally a real resurrection of some, presumably the faithful for reward and the unfaithful for punishment.

The choice of “to awake” influenced the later language of resurrection, which is always some form of to wake up and to get up. It is a natural metaphor, given that sleep is often used to refer to death and the dead. It conveys that conviction that just as the person who sleeps and then wakes up is the same person in two different modes of being, likewise person was died and then was raised is the same person, but again in two (very) different modes of being.

Verse 3 The wise is a phrase taken from Isaiah 52-53, where the suffering servant is rewarded. The wise are associated with the stars and hence with the angels. In Hellenistic culture, astral immortality was in the air (!) and the writer of Daniel is able to echo this aspect of the culture. However, in Daniel those raised do not become stars, rather they *shine like* stars. Their reward is for correct teaching and witness.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It might be good to ask where does my own hope of immortality spring from and how can I live so that I may come to it.

2. The importance of good leadership and good teaching is evident. The reward is for those who will lead many to righteousness.

PRAYER

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God of the living for who all are alive, awaken in us a longing for righteousness, so that when we hear your call, our hearts will respond. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16 (15); Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; Mark 13:24-32

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading shares the same apocalyptic outlook as the Gospel and makes a good introduction to it.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 16 (15) was originally a prayer of the Levites, who had no portion in the land. Some of the lines sound like an affirmation of life after death, though again, these should most likely be read metaphorically in their historical context.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Daniel 12:1-3

We all wonder about belief in life after death—is it for real, what could it be like? Belief in the resurrection of the dead came surprisingly late in the biblical tradition. The context was religious persecution and how would God be faithful to those who had been faithful to him to the very point of death.

Second reading

Hebrews 10:11-14, 18

How do we understand today what happened for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus? The writer, using Temple symbolism, tells us that Jesus' death, once for all, brought us everlasting healing and forgiveness.

Gospel

Mark 12:24-32

In these unstable times, we do wonder about the future, ecologically as much as economically. Perhaps we can take courage from the words: *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

Monday 18 November

Dedication of the Basilicas of Sts Peter and Paul, apostles

Apocalypse 1:1-4, 2:1-5

The opening words of this reading promise us happiness—if we listen! The close letter is call to repentance, never too late!

Luke 18:35-43

The blind man is strategically placed on the road out of Jericho, just when pilgrims would be feeling uplifted by the proximity of the Holy City. In expanded form, the prayer of the blind man has entered Christian tradition as the “Jesus prayer”: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

Tuesday 19 November

Apocalypse 3:1-6, 14-22

The gospel communities in Sardis and Laodicea give the impression being alive...but the reality is otherwise. This wake-up call is for us too.

Luke 19:1-10

This beloved story has universal appeal. It illustrates both the proclamation of the Good News and its reception by conversation of heart. Of course, we all have to climb our own sycamore trees!

Wednesday 20 November

Apocalypse 4:1-11

A worship scene opens up for us: rich in symbol and mysterious. At the centre we hear words we use at every mass; at the end, we confess God, the creator of all there is.

Luke 19:11-28

Luke's version of this parable —also found in Matthew, with an echo in Mark)—is provocative, even disturbing. It does reflect the instability of the making and unmaking of kings is late first century Palestine. At the same time, Luke wants us to read it as part of his teaching about Jesus, both proclaimer of the Kingdom and King. The frame is a severe warning not to flitter away the time of delay because the King will indeed return at an unexpected time.

Thursday 21 November

Presentation of the BVM

Apocalypse 5:1-10

The sealed scroll contains the plan of God for the course of history. Who can open it? The lamb—Jesus—can open it, because of his cross and resurrection.

Luke 19:41-44

Our Gospel today—unique to Luke—

looks back historically to what actually happened. Jesus looks back not in anger but in compassion. At the same time, the reason for the destruction is given: *all because you did not recognise your opportunity when God offered it.* This final comment brings the text into our present reality. Cf. *See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!* (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Friday 22 November

St Cecilia, virgin and martyr

Apocalypse 10:8-11

This puzzling scene—an echo of Ezekiel—tell us that the writer had a message both bitter and sweet. Sweet to those on the side of God; bitter to those on “the other side.”

Luke 19:45-48

Luke's version of the Temple action is much gentler perhaps reflecting Luke's concern to affirm the Jewish roots of the Christian movement. It is, nevertheless, a judgment and a prophetic call.

Saturday 23 November

St Columbanus, abbot and missionary

Apocalypse 11:4-12

The Apocalypse does not lack obscurity—at least for us today! Who are the “two witnesses”? The imagery of the olive trees and the lampstands suggests channels through which God's grace becomes effective, offering light. The Old Testament reference is to Zech 4:1-14: Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the king, here standing for the *priestly* and *royal* roles of Israel. Thus, they symbolise the church, God's new people, both *priestly* and *kingly*.

The witnesses—church members—will indeed suffer martyrdom, but they are alive in God and their witness is ever effective.

Luke 20:27-40

Our reading today is certainly mysterious. It echoes stories of Elijah and Elisha. The prophets did and will suffer—but God, in whose hands they are, will raise them up.