

Advent Sunday 2020

The scriptures we're given to read on this Advent Sunday, and on a number of other occasions during Advent, are not for the fainthearted.

'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

What are we to make of all this?

A little history first.

Jesus lived between approximately the year 0 and the year 33. 37 years after he died, in AD 70, the Jewish Temple was destroyed.

This was the Second temple, the one that succeeded the Temple built by Solomon and it lasted from around 516 BC until AD 70 having been completely rebuilt under the Herod the Great, a rebuilding which started some twenty year before Jesus was born.

Its destruction by Roman Soldiers, following a Jewish rebellion, in AD 70 was a very big deal indeed. It had been the centre of worship for Jewish people for over a thousand years. The event itself was also gruesome. An account written at the time estimated that 1.1 million people were killed - the number was so high because it happened at Passover and people from far and wide had flocked to the Temple for the festival.

Advent Sunday is the church's New Year's Day. We start a new set of readings every Advent - and this year is the year of Mark's gospel - you'll get other gospel writers, but you'll get more of Mark than anyone else. Today's gospel reading is from Mark, and most people estimate that Mark's gospel was written in the year AD 70. So we may have two things going on - talk of the 'the sun being darkened, and the moon not giving light, and the stars falling from heaven' are the words of Jesus in Marks' gospel, and perhaps he was warning his followers of what was to come - the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. At the same time you have Mark remembering Jesus's words - with Mark quite possibly writing at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem itself. Combine the two - the prophesy of Jesus and the context of the writer and its no wonder that sun and the moon are about to be extinguished, and the stars are falling from heaven.

But if that's the case - what can these lines from Scripture possibly say to us some two thousand years later? I think it's important to link this passage to the destruction of Jerusalem, but I think Jesus's words have a wider meaning which transcend that particular event and those words can speak directly to us.

Jesus goes on to say: '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.

I think about those words personally, and I think about them for the world around me.

I have no idea when my last day will be.

And again I have no idea when the last days of our world will be.

I am instinctively quite sceptical about people announcing that the end of the world is imminent, though I hope I retain an appropriate and reasoned concern about what we're doing to our planet and what the consequences might be if we don't communally change our ways. Equally I know that it's possible that tensions between nations can be translated into devastating destruction.

'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.

Jesus's counsel to us - precisely because we do not know the day or the hour - is to keep alert, to keep awake.

What does that actually mean? I think we can rule out a life without sleep - this is spiritual advice, not an injunction to embrace insomnia as something that will bring us closer to God.

I'd like to have a good at listing out a few things that are important to me:

I think it means being alert, as we were reminded last Sunday to Christ in our midst in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick the prisoner. Serve the least of those around you and you'll be serving Christ. I try, and frequently fail, to be alert to those people.

I try to be alert to all those around me being made in the image of God knowing that however deeply it's buried, the good in them is of God.

I try to be alert to the needs of people around me, knowing full well that the need in me, the things that trouble or preoccupy me, often cloud my vision. I think that's particularly acute just now for all of us. There are so many challenges for people at the moment - it takes a conscious act of will to raise your eyes from the things that are challenging in our own lives, to see the needs of those around us, even though they be glaringly more acute.

I try to be alert to God in creation - to treasure the natural world and to see things of beauty, whether natural or the work of human hands or voices, as having their origin in God.

I try to be alert to injustice, knowing that it is contrary to God's purposes, that anything we can do to counter it will get us closer to the Kingdom of God.

I try to remember that Christmas is a celebration of Jesus's birth, the Word made Flesh, God with us, not simply a break in lockdown regulations and an opportunity for the mixing of households - however welcome that is.

To sum up, I try, and frequently fail, to be alert to God and neighbour to be watchful, to keep spiritually awake.

I think we're given these bracing passages of Scripture to give us a bit of a jolt so that we're fully awake by December 25th- 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken'.

Good to remember that the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 was probably the primary reference point for this. But Jesus's council is for all time - 'Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.' Alert to God, and alert to those around us.

Amen.

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