

**Advent Sunday, Year B 29/11/2020.**

**No Services permitted in church due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.**

**Isaiah 64.1-9, 1 Corinthians 1.3-9, Mark 13.24-37**

**Isaiah 64.1-9**

<sup>1</sup> O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—<sup>2</sup>as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! <sup>3</sup>When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. <sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people.

**1 Corinthians 1.3-9**

<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup>for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— <sup>6</sup>just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— <sup>7</sup>so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Mark 13.24-37**

<sup>24</sup> 'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup>and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. <sup>26</sup>Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>'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. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>32</sup>'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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, <sup>36</sup>or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Is it not an interesting fact that Doctor Who and his fellow Gallifreyans are named not simply as Time Travellers but as Time Lords? The ability to travel anywhere in time and space - how I wished for that as a child! - must make you more than a mere voyager through time but it's

master. It must also be very confusing. In our state of lockdown we notice how the days seem to run into each other, how much more confusing then, if time itself is doing that! Imagine not knowing whether something you experience has already happened, or is going to happen or is happening for the first time even as you experience it. To stay half-way sane you would have to be able not only to travel through time but to truly be its master, that is to be in charge of the whole process of history from beginning to end. Perhaps that explains why Doctor Who always comes across as a little crazed!

That sense of confusion or disorientation - time-sickness if you like - is what confronts us with these readings for the first Sunday in Advent. We are of course rather used to the Advent season launching with the vision of the Last Judgement and the warning to us to be ready for it. Let us though, as ever, start by taking careful note of the context of these readings. The gospel reading from Mark (as we begin Lectionary Year B with its focus on Mark's Gospel) occupies the same location in the Passion Story as last week's reading from Matthew 25. That is it is the end of the chapter just before we turn to the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Where Matthew left us pondering the demand of the Kingdom to serve the King in the person of the least of his brothers and sisters, after having already explored the theme of the King coming in judgement, Mark leaves us going into Maundy Thursday still with the reality of judgement dominating our thoughts.

As we have seen at some length in Matthew's Gospel, for Jesus, the disciples and the original participants in these events, the reality of judgement is the reality of God fulfilling his ages old promise to come and take charge - kingship - of his people and to restore them and vindicate them before their enemies. The Old Testament prophecies make clear that this restoration must involve God pronouncing a judgement on all that is opposed to his holiness and kingly rule. That judgement falls first on his own people. This is why both John the Baptist and Jesus begin, at the start of the gospels, by announcing not only that the kingdom of God is come but also calling on the people to repent - how else could they endure the return of the King? We see something of this in today's reading from Isaiah, with its picture of God coming, in judgement, tearing open the heavens and making the mountains shake. Isaiah makes it clear that the first to be called to judgement are God's own wayward and sinful people. Even this passage in Isaiah puts us in danger of time-sickness though. The opening words seem straightforward enough: *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down*. This is something that is going to happen, or at least there is a longing for it to happen in the future, probably the immediate future. I am assured by my commentaries though that the English lets us down. The Hebrew construction here requires a past tense: *O that you HAD*. The commentaries suggest that this puts a different light on it and makes it a wistful looking back to before the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel-Samaria, thinking how differently things might have turned out if God had called his people to order first. The King coming in judgement has implications for his people and for the world around them. Isaiah looks back wistfully, but also forward with hope, because for all that God's nature endures, his nature of being opposed to all that is anti-God, all that is unholy, so also his nature of being unboundedly merciful endures. In that there is hope.

So with Isaiah we are displaced in time, this is about the past, even for Isaiah, but also about the future. The time-sickness is no less confusing with Jesus' words in Mark. The language is dramatic: *'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.* It echoes words of Isaiah that we find in chapters 13 and 34 of that prophecy. The deliberate quotation by Jesus of Isaiah's words is intended to put his listeners on notice that he is talking about the judgement passages from of old. We are not to see them as literal, photo-realistic pictures of the end of the world. After all, talking about our current global pandemic we use terms like cataclysmic and earth-shattering, without literally meaning that there has been an increase in seismic activity. The point is to focus us on the spiritual implications of what is happening. So Jesus conjures up scenes of judgement that his fellow-Jews would have instantly recognised. He then moves them towards the scene in the throne room of heaven when the 'Son of Man' comes in his glory to take his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Ancient of Days - and here Jesus is again using a familiar picture and quoting from the book of Daniel (chapter 7). Hence the confusion about time. Is this a picture of the end of time? Is it happening here and now? Is it, perhaps something that has already taken place in the halls of heaven?

In the context of both Mark and what we have seen in Matthew, our first answer might be that this is something that happens during that first Holy Week. The King, promised by Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and the other prophets, is entering into his Kingdom and judgement is coming first on those of his people who have wilfully failed. Mercy and salvation are also coming with the King, and he marvellously takes both outcomes on himself, in his own body, on the Cross. So yes, this is the coming of the King promised from of old by Isaiah. These events of the first Holy Week, like the budding of a fig-tree in spring, are the signs for the people that all is reaching its fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth.

It is then, more than a little disorienting to read in 1 Corinthians of St Paul talking as if this is all still to come in the future. *We are waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. [God] will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* The Day of the Lord from the Old Testament has become the day of OUR Lord, Jesus Christ. And we are still waiting for it - both in Paul's time and now, nearly 2,000 years later! Was the understanding of the events of Holy Week wrong? Did Jesus not take up his throne at the Cross and take his seat at the Ascension? What can Paul mean?

It might help to think a little about our own lives. The day of our birth was perhaps the most momentous event in them. After all, without a successful birth there would be no 'us'. It must also have been a fairly cataclysmic and earth-shattering event, which fortunately none of us remember - although our mothers almost certainly do! Our birth-day is so significant that it has an echo throughout our lives. When we celebrate its anniversary we mark its significance, although, mercifully, we do not repeat the experience. There is an element of both past and present with each birthday. Some birthdays take on greater significance as they mark key milestones - 18, 21, 50 and so on. Some we prefer to ignore or forget! Forgive me if this next statement seems a little morbid, but there is a point to it. Each birthday marked takes us

inexorably one step closer to the last time. You perhaps know that the Saints' Days marked in the Church Calendar fall not on the day of a saint's birth, but that of their death. In Christian thinking the day of death is actually equivalent to the first event of the day of our birth. It marks our entering in to our new state of being, the other side of death, in glory with our Risen Lord. Do you begin to see the pattern? Our birth, as Christians, is not a single one-off event. It has happened in the past. It is present with us throughout our lives and it is also a goal towards which we are heading. Much the same is true of Jesus coming as our King. It happened at a moment in time in first century Jerusalem. In happening it connected with ancient prophecies. But in happening it also prefigures something yet to come. The first Christians quickly picked up on this which is why Paul writes about the day of our Lord Jesus Christ which is yet to arrive.

I think we have to live with the disorientation of Time travel when it comes to God's Judgement. It has happened, is happening - especially for us as individuals when our allotted span ends - and it is yet to happen. What, though, are we to do about it? Jesus' instruction is clear *Keep alert! Keep awake! You don't know when the time will come.* Paul in various places in his letters, similarly encourages us to be on our guard, being watchful because we don't know when our Lord will return. Let us finish today, as we begin our Advent wait, with the encouragement of his words to the Christians in ancient Corinth: *God will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

I wish you all a blessed, watchful and hopeful Advent.