

Advent Sunday 2020 (Mk.13:24-end)

Well, where to start with that Gospel reading?

Perhaps with one of the lines in it that causes most difficulty: 'truly I tell you,' says Jesus, 'this generation will not pass away till all these things have taken place.' This generation: the people standing there then. They wouldn't die before everything he was speaking of had happened – the sun darkened, the earth quaking, the stars falling, the Son of Man coming with the clouds. But here we are: many, many generations later. And here too is the world, trundling on as usual. So was Jesus, then, just *wrong*? And wrong, let us note, not on some minor detail but on something he seems to have spoken about a great deal in his teaching?

One of the standard manoeuvres at this point is to say that well, maybe not so much wrong, as speaking *symbolically*. It *looks* like he's predicting the end of the world, but really he's talking about something different. Maybe, for instance, he's talking about the radical change the Gospel should bring in each of our lives – how becoming a Christian should mean such a dramatic turn-around, such a break with the old, that it really should seem like the end of a world. Or, perhaps he's talking about how each of our individual worlds come to an end when we die. That could happen at any time, suddenly, shockingly. We need to be ready for it, ready to face Judgement after it.

Both perfectly valid things to say - but if Jesus really meant something like this when he said what he said in Mark 13, he chose a very odd way to express himself indeed. The whole speech begins in answer to a question about when the Temple is going to be destroyed – as Jesus shockingly predicts it will be – and it's all about things that happen in the real, external world: armies and kings and earthquakes and wars and refugees. No first century Jew hearing this would understand it as being about internal, private, religious life. No, they would think Jesus meant really dramatic things happening in the real world, and really soon.

At which point – pause for a moment. What *did* actually happen, really soon? Well, first of all, Good Friday and Easter happened: marked, the Gospels tell us, by the sun refusing to shine, by darkness in the afternoon and by earthquakes. Now perhaps those claims are themselves symbolic ... maybe. But if the evangelists invented them, they did so to make a point – to bring together crucifixion and resurrection with what Jesus says here. To say that Good Friday and Easter are, in the most important sense, the end of the world. Yes, of course, for now time trundles on. But the Gospel is that through what happened on the cross and in the tomb, everything is changed, and changed utterly. The old world has been ended, and God's kingdom has begun. It is not yet come in fullness, obviously – more of that in a moment – but the decisive act has been accomplished.

And then, within a mere five decades, just before 'this generation' had indeed passed away – what next? Something very public indeed. A desperate Jewish rebellion against Rome, which ended with the legionaries sweeping through the land, laying waste to Jerusalem and burning the Temple. Burning the Temple: it really is hard for us to imagine how world-ending that was for a first century Jew. Your entire sense of being God's people, of how God related to the world, of what it meant to be human – all of it, left literally in smoking ruins. This really does justify 'end of the world language'. If you lived through disaster of that magnitude, you'd not think that Mark 13 was an awkward case of Jesus being wrong. You'd think 'my God, he was right.'

Is that it though? Does Good Friday and Easter on the one hand, and the destruction of Jerusalem on the other, exhaust the meaning of Mark 13? No. When you listen to Jesus' teaching as a whole, when you absorb the same prophets of Israel that he absorbed, when you hear the apostles He instructed, you realise that these events, world-changing as they are, are not enough. Indeed, it looks like the reason He described them how he did, using the language we call *apocalyptic*, of falling stars and angels and earthquakes, was not just to say 'these things are very important events in history' but to say, 'these things are more than history.' These things are the beginning of the End of the World – not only in a metaphorical or psychological sense, but in the literal sense. A time is coming, and these historical events are ushering it in, when there will be no more time. No more history. The End, with a capital E. When exactly? 'No-one knows. Neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.' But come it will.

I wonder what your first reaction to that teaching is: a time is coming when there will be no more time. The End with a capital 'E'. The thought, to put it most starkly, that the year of our Lord 2021 might not actually happen. I guess one reaction is to find it simply bewildering. We have become so used to the years just going on, and on, and on, that we assume they always will, even if eons from now, when the sun has gone cold, there are no humans left to count them. Time, and the universe, we think almost instinctively, just rolls on.

The Bible tells a quite different story. Indeed, according to the Bible, the world is a story, one story, which comes to a definitive end. God made this world for a purpose., that it would be full of his glory – that everything about it would shine with the vibrancy and brightness and energy of his being, that it would be the perfect expression of Him. That's where the world is going. And the idea that things would just meander on for ever, or wind down into extinction, is anathema to this story. In this story, all things are coming alive, all things are ending in glory.

Why should you believe this story? Why should anyone think it's true, and what difference does it make anyway? First, the question of truth. Well, of course, it can't be proved – if it could be proved, the world would already be Christian. But here's why, if you are a Christian anyway, you should also believe this part of the Gospel. Not just because Jesus taught it, not just because it is part of the Creed – though those are indeed good reasons. But because in Jesus, we have seen it. I said a few moments ago that God created the world to be full of his vibrancy and energy and beauty, to be the perfect expression of Himself. Well, that's what we saw in Jesus. Around him, people were healed, set free from greed and fear, raised from the dead. Vibrancy began, the kingdom began. Sin and Death burned up. They burned up, even when they looked most triumphant, even when they nailed him to a cross and shut him in a tomb. He came blazing out of it. That's what we mean by Resurrection. It's not just that Jesus goes to Heaven and shows there's an after-life. That's only a fragment, and a misleading one at that, of what the Bible means by Resurrection. Resurrection means that on Easter morning, sin and death and futility lost their grip over the whole creation. Resurrection means that the glory which burned in Jesus, which consumed all sin and death, is going to burn in all things. On that one bright morning in Jerusalem in A.D.33 we were told, we were shown, how the whole story of the world is going to end. We are headed for joy.

And what difference does it make? Why does it matter whether anyone believes this or not? Well, think for a moment of how we have all, I imagine, felt in the last two weeks with the sudden announcements and then the growing confidence that, at last, coronavirus vaccines are on their way. It might yet go wrong, of course, but it's beginning to look like come May, come June, our long Covid-winter will be over. Our masks will be off, we'll be singing and hugging once again. Doesn't that make a difference? Doesn't that lift your hearts? It makes it possible to bear the burdens, to struggle through. It means we won't collapse inside, we won't give into fear and misery and exhaustion. Healing is coming! And knowing that begins to heal us even now. And that's the difference made by one little vaccine.

Well think then what it means to live in the sure and certain hope that a much greater healing is coming. A healing that is going to embrace everything that is and ever was, everything we thought was broken and lost and dead, all of it embraced, called to life, made vibrant, made beautiful. Things don't just go on. Things *end*, and they end together in glory. If that is your deepest, base rock conviction it will make all the difference in the world to how you live now. You will see everything and everyone in resurrection light. Every broken relationship. Every lost love. Every terrible guilt or shame – everything that threatens to overwhelm us with fear, grief and exhaustion – you will face it all, you will bear it all, you will hope through it all because you know that there is simply nothing, *nothing*, left outside the scope of the great healing to come.

That's what Jesus meant by the End of the World. That's what his death and resurrection make happen; that's why we give thanks to God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.