

JAKOB'S STORY IS OUR STORY

Isaiah 64. 1-9

1 Corinthians 1. 3-9

Mark 13. 24-37

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Traditionally, the texts for the First Sunday of Advent are not focussed on the birth of our Lord, but on his Second Coming. They call our attention to the end of time, to the dismantling of the cosmos and the fulfilment of God's purposes for creation.

On this First Sunday of Advent, I imagine that most of us would like to hear a gospel passage that tells us that everything is all right, and that everything will continue to be OK. We prefer reassurance, stability and certainty. If anything is amiss, we would like to be able to do something about it; to correct the situation; and to get on with our lives.

Instead, our appointed text from St Mark's gospel tells us that the stars are going to fall, that the powers in the heavens will be shaken, and the Son of Man will be coming in the clouds with power. This passage is part of a larger description of suffering and upheaval leading to the end of the world as we know it. All we can do about it is stay awake and wait expectantly for events to unfold.

The Scriptures contain a number of significant passages of this same type. Some are in the Old Testament, in books like Daniel and Zechariah; and others are in the New Testament, in the gospels of Mark and Luke, and in the book of Revelation. Depending on the biblical text that you are reading, the 'Day of the Lord' is sometimes described as a day of darkness, dread and disaster, or a day of judgment;

and sometimes it is depicted as a day of light and hope, or a day of deliverance and redemption.

It is worthwhile to take a few moments to understand some of the images in this passage. The most puzzling part is at the beginning where Jesus is quoted as saying: ‘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. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory’ (13. 24-26).

I think that these words have a double fulfilment. They were fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ, and they will be fulfilled in the last day when our Lord returns. There were signs in the heavens at his death. In his time, there was a widespread belief that spiritual powers resided in the stars and planets. At his ascension to heaven, those powers saw him coming in the clouds with power and great glory.

Cataclysmic events will occur in the Last Day as well. The message here is both about the natural order and about the realm of spiritual powers. The stars will fall, to be sure, but with their fall will come the fall of the spiritual powers that oppose the work of God.¹

Our passage in St Mark’s gospel takes us out of our comfort zone. We already know many of the trials and troubles of this world; and now we are reminded of things beyond this world that also oppose and threaten us. But Jesus tells us that the victory is assured. Deliverance is certain to occur. Listen to his promise: ‘Then he will send out the angels, and gather together his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven’ (13. 27). ‘His elect’...that means you. It is you that he will gather to himself as a shepherd gathers the scattered sheep.

¹ Cf. Ephesians 6. 10-13, which speaks of ‘cosmic powers’ and of ‘spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places’.

And what does that mean for our lives here and now?

Not long ago, I came across a film with a story line that might help us view this text in a fresh way. The story describes a situation that parallels, in several ways, the theology pertinent to the text we have from Mark's gospel, and others like it.

The film is called 'Jakob the Liar'. Its story is about Jews living in a ghetto in Poland in the waning days of the Second World War. They were closely guarded and heavily exploited by a contingent of German soldiers. In the film, the main character Jakob (who lives in the Jewish ghetto) accidentally overhears a radio in the German headquarters reporting that the Russian army is advancing in the area.

Of course, Jakob lets the secret be known among the residents of the ghetto. Initially, it surfaced in the form of a rumour with some credibility; and with each telling it grew. Some people did not believe it and dismissed the whole idea. But many did believe it, and they responded to it in different ways. The hope that deliverance was at hand began to make a difference in their lives.

For example, one young man decided that it was time to propose marriage to the girl he loved. Some of those who were near death took hope that they could live until they were freed; and others renewed their efforts to help them. A group was organised to begin a resistance movement so they might help and cooperate with their deliverers.

Of course, the news was important to the Germans as well. They began to prepare to leave. They began to round up all the Jews and put them on a train to the death camps. Jakob and his colleagues could do nothing to hasten the day of deliverance. What they could do was to live as people *who were destined to be saved*.

For the Jews, the advance of the Russian army was good news and promised deliverance. For the Germans, it was a foreshadowing of disaster.

In the story, Jakob suffered at the hands of his captors for spreading the good news of deliverance. They tried to compel him to retract his story and to take hope away from his community. But Jakob's way of living with the promise of deliverance was to refuse to recant, and he gave his life for it.

What was portrayed in the film was an enclave of people contained by forces greater than themselves. And they were a small part of a larger, world-wide conflict. The resolution of the larger conflict and their own deliverance were bound together. What was coming was not only their deliverance, but the defeat of an evil empire and the advent of a new peace in the world.

So it is with us. We who wait for Christ's return are in bondage to the powers of evil, and our situation is part of a larger conflict; a conflict of cosmic proportions. The victory that is coming through our Lord pertains not only to our own redemption, but also to the redemption of the whole of creation. We ourselves cannot bring that about, but we can wait for it with eager expectation and hope.

We all profess our faith in Jesus Christ. We look forward to a sure redemption. And Jesus bids us stay awake, to be alert, and to be about his business always, for he will come at an unexpected moment, without advance notice. While some people try to predict the end of the world, I suggest that we avoid attempting that and live instead with a vital faith day to day.

In Jakob's story, the captives lived out their belief in the approach of the Russian army in a variety of ways. How do we live out our faith in the coming of Christ?

I do not have a script for you on that. I think that is something that we could explore with one another as a part of our fellowship in Christ. Maybe some of us would want to be telling the good news to others. Perhaps some of us would have a message of peace and reconciliation for the world which is now in such conflict. Others may make it their habit to serve and help the weak and needy. Still others might live with a vibrant appreciation of God's gifts in creation. All of us, I think, would want to be very much 'alive' in a dying world; very much 'connected' in a culture of individualism; very confident in an atmosphere of faithlessness; and continually generous in a selfish and acquisitive society.

However we decide to do it, we are to be alert and awake. Jesus is coming again. It has been the prayer of the Church through the centuries, and it appropriate that it be our prayer this Advent Day: 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!'