

Advent 1 year B 2020

Happy New Year, everyone. And welcome to the year of Mark's Gospel. I hope you have some good running shoes on, because Mark is in a hurry. We are going from John the Baptist to the resurrection of Jesus in just 661 verses, 606 of which, I am told, you can also find in Matthew - so if much of what we are going to hear this year sounds familiar it is because Matthew has borrowed it - and you all (at St John's) read the whole of St Matthew's Gospel last year, didn't you? Because I asked you to! Now, instead of one chapter a day for 28 days, which was my suggestion for Matthew, I am going to recommend a large pot of coffee, so that you can read Mark all in one go - because that is clearly what Mark intended - except he didn't expect many people to read what he had written - he expected it to be read aloud to those early Christians in his community (probably in Rome, although some question about that) who not only wanted to know about Jesus but also wanted assurance that their suffering (indeed for many, their martyrdom) was not in vain.

So Mark writes as a pastor, to build up the faith of his community by reflecting on the identity and destiny of Jesus ('the Son of Man'), and by inviting them to think about the

consequences of their own discipleship in taking up their cross and following Jesus. (see Mark 13.9-13).

Chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel, part of which we have as our reading today, is his account of a teaching session Jesus gives to four of his disciples - the usual three, Peter, James and John, together with Andrew, the four who had been with him from the beginning. Verses 9-13, which we have not heard today, refer to the sufferings which the followers of Jesus can expect - persecution for his sake. In spite of this they are to preach the Gospel (v10), to stand firm (v13) and to watch - to watch as servants of a man who has gone on a journey - when will he come back? They don't know. They can only watch - stay awake - and be ready. And that command 'Keep awake' concludes Jesus' teaching in Mark's Gospel - and the passion narrative begins. Watching and waiting is a persistent biblical theme - we had it in today's reading from Isaiah, and elsewhere in his prophecy - 'no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him'. In Psalm 37 we read - 'Stay quiet before Yahweh, wait longingly for him' (Ps37.7JB). But this waiting is not a passive thing, just hanging around waiting for something to happen. It

involves longing and commitment - passionate patience, anticipation.

Do you anticipate encountering God today? Will your active waiting be rewarded? Or are you taking a day-off for good behaviour? Have you not noticed that the master returns to his house every day, even if the door keeper doesn't notice or recognise him? Today he is here, in the form of bread and wine. He has already been here in the reading of scripture. He was here when someone dropped pennies into the bucket for Water Aid, or left food on the back pew for the food bank. He is here because he promised to be here, when two or three are gathered in his name. And he also promised 'I am with you always, to the end of the age'.

But do we see him, when he is with us? Do we see him in one another, or in the faces of the poor and needy, the lonely, those in troubles? Do we recognise him in the voices of the oppressed, the starving, those denied justice or sanctuary? Last Sunday Jesus told us where to look for him (Matt 25).

When he finally comes in his glory, we had better not complain that it took him a long time to come - after all, if he had come within a generation of Mark writing his Gospel we would have had

no St Regulus, no St Francis of Assisi, no Martin Luther or Martin Luther King Jnr., no William Wilberforce. There would have been no Gothic cathedrals, no Michael Angelo paintings, no music from the Bach family, no Anglican plainchant, and no - well, you add your list. And certainly no you and me!

Perhaps God is just waiting so long because he wants us to get it right the next time - giving us a second chance. After all, in Mark's Gospel, in the garden of Gethsemane, the disciples are told to wait and stay awake - but they go to sleep. Then they run away, and Peter even denies knowing Jesus. They are not there at the crucifixion. Only the women stay faithful, and even they are afraid - too afraid to speak the message of resurrection. But we know from Luke's book The Acts of the Apostles that they (the disciples) did get it right, they did preach the Gospel, they did stay firm (some of them even unto death), and they waited and hoped and watched for the signs of his coming.

And that watchful hope calls us to similar discipleship - to a belief in a better future, a new normal, where there is no need for food banks, no need for Crisis at Christmas, no need for Water Aid, no need for 'lefty lawyers' to fight for the rights of

asylum seekers - indeed no need for people to seek asylum,
because the Prince of Peace rules all the nations.

Advent - not only a time of watching and waiting for the future,
but a time for look out for the needs of the present, a time for
action, as in our daily lives we encounter the Master of the
house, here amongst us.