

Homilies for Advent 2011

November 27, 2011 – First Sunday of Advent (B)

Readings

1. Isaiah 63.16b-17, 19b; 64.2-7

Psalms 80.2-3, 15-16, 18-19 Response: “Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.”

2. 1Corinthians 1.3-9

3. Mark 13.33-37

Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading by Bill Hunt

Advent is a time for us to recall Jesus’ proclamation of the coming of the Reign of God and to consider prayerfully what that means in our time. This coming is symbolized in the “events” of the glorification of Jesus (Resurrection and Ascension) and of his Second Coming. On the first Sunday of Advent Mark’s Jesus warns us to pay attention, to stay awake, and, especially, to watch. Centuries later we continue to ask: What are we watching for? and How should we watch?

The Historical Context

Today’s gospel reading concludes chapter 13 of Mark’s Gospel, often called “The Little Apocalypse.” It is followed immediately by Mark’s passion narrative. Writing about forty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Mark collects various sayings and parables of Jesus that relate to the coming of God’s Reign. This coming was originally thought to be immanent.

Earlier in Mark’s Gospel Jesus says: “Truly [Amen], I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” (Mark 9.1 RSV) By the time that Mark wrote few, if any, of those who had actually heard Jesus speak were still alive. How could Jesus’ word be reconciled with the facts?

Mark did this in two ways. First, he placed the story of Jesus’ transfiguration immediately after the cryptic saying in 9.1. He seems to be implying that as witnesses to Jesus’ transfiguration Peter, James, and John had seen the coming of the Reign of God in power. Second, in today’s gospel passage, as well as in other places in his Gospel, he shifts the emphasis from the

immediacy of the coming of God's Reign to its certainty, even though the exact time remains a mystery. Also, for Mark's readers the return of Jesus in glory is associated with the definitive coming of God's Reign.

The Literary Context

One of the characteristics of Mark's writing style is the so-called "Markan sandwich." Mark places two similar passages before and after another passage that contains the key to their interpretation. For example in chapter 5 of Mark's Gospel the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage is sandwiched between the two episodes of the raising of Jairus' daughter.

At the end of Chapter 13 we find a triple-decker Dagwood sandwich containing five passages.

A. vv. 28-29 The parable of the fig tree's blossoming.

B. v. 30 A time-saying similar to 9.1: "Truly [Amen], I say to you this generation will not pass away before all these things take place." (RSV)

C. v. 31 A saying about Jesus' truthfulness and authority: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (RSV)

B' v. 32 Another time-saying: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (RSV)

A' vv. 33-37 Another parable of the watchful gatekeeper (this Sunday's gospel reading).

By using this literary structure Mark places the emphasis on part C, verse 31. Mark is saying to his readers that, despite all evidence to the contrary, they can rely on the word of Jesus. Mark is also inviting them and us to search out the deeper meaning of Jesus' two parables and two time-sayings in the light of this central saying in verse 31.

The Liturgical Context

In each of the three cycles the Advent gospel readings follow a similar pattern. The reading for the first Sunday of Advent mirrors the previous Sunday's reading (the last Sunday of ordinary time) and emphasizes the definitive coming of God's reign at the end of time. The readings for the second and third Sundays of Advent concentrate on John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus. The readings of the fourth Sunday present the parents of Jesus: the annunciation to Joseph (Cycle A); the annunciation to Mary (Cycle B); and Mary's visitation of Elizabeth (Cycle C). The implication seems to be that there is a parallel between the anticipation of the coming of the Reign of God in the life and ministry of Jesus and in the anticipation of the definitive coming of the Reign of God at the end of time. In other words what we know about the first coming throws light on and is symbolic of the second coming.

What are we watching for?

Central to the gospel that Jesus preached was the proclamation: “The time [kairós] is fulfilled, and the reign of God is at hand; change your way of thinking, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1.15 and parallels [my translation]) What was this “reign” or “kingdom” or “imperial rule?”

Hundreds, if not thousands, of articles and books have been written on this subject, but there is widespread agreement that the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed is a transcendent reality that is manifested in our world of space and time. (It is not something that is exclusively realized in “heaven” after our death.) “The Reign of God” is not a geographical term. Rather, it is a dynamic term for the exercise of God’s power over our lives and over human history. God’s Reign is also set over against the reign of Caesar - the combination of political, religious, and military might that dominated life in Galilee, Judea, Perea, and throughout the Roman Empire. Effectively proclaimed, the Reign of God will inevitably come into conflict with the violent reign of Caesar.

The reign of God is closely associated with the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Its full realization is yet to be realized, but it is already breaking out in the present. It calls to us from beyond the future, but challenges us at the right times (kairoí) to act in accordance with God’s will. The full realization of the reign of God is not strictly speaking an event. It is a transcendent reality, like the resurrection of Jesus, which cannot be adequately expressed in human language. As a present reality it is expressed as God with us; as a future promise it is called the return of Jesus. Neither is subject to human control or prediction.

Both the present realization of God’s Reign and its future promise require discernment in faith with the help of God’s Spirit. By lives of love and service the Church is called to be a symbol or sacrament or sign of this divine reality.

How should we watch?

Mark gives us a clue when he adapts the saying of Jesus about our lack of knowledge to the fourfold Roman division of the day: “in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning.” (The Israelites divided the night into three watches. See Luke 12.38; Fuller & Westberg 2006, 219.) Mark appears to have structured his passion narrative around these four time indicators:

1. “in the evening” Mark places the Last supper “when it was evening” (14.17) Jesus alerts the disciples, especially Peter, about their coming betrayal. They did not pay attention to the kairós and watch.
2. “at midnight” Mark does not use the Greek word mesonúktion in his passion narrative, but he situates Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, his betrayal and arrest, and his trial before the council [Sanhedrin] during the night. In the garden Jesus mentions “watching” three times. (14.34, 37, & 38.) Peter, James, and John did not heed his warning.
3. “at cockcrow” Peter was caught unaware again before the cock crowed a second time. (14.72)

4. "in the morning" "As soon as it was morning the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate." (15.1) The rest of the passion takes place during the day as Mark notes the third (15.25), sixth (15.33), and ninth (15.34) hours in relation to Jesus' crucifixion and the "evening" (15.42) as the time of his burial.

Thus, we see that Mark has arranged an entire day from beginning (evening) to end (ninth hour) as a time (*kairós*) of trial or testing. Mark contrasts Jesus' steadfast witness to the coming of God's Reign with the failure of all the others, the disciples, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, the soldiers, the crowds, and the bystanders. By implication Mark is saying that we must watch too, not just throughout the night, but through the daylight hours as well.

However, the picture is not entirely bleak. At cockcrow Peter not only denied Jesus but also repented in tears. At the ninth hour, after Jesus died, the Centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (15.39); in the evening Joseph of Arimathea "who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus." (15.43); and "very early on the first day of the week [the women] went to the tomb." (16.2) After Jesus expired (15.39) his followers became attentive to the times (*kairoí*) and began witnessing to the coming of God's Reign in Jesus.

Application

What does all this mean for us today? In today's gospel reading Mark's Jesus tells us that since we do not know when the time (*kairós*) will come we must be on the watch always – night and day. In the early centuries of Christianity this led to the seven hours of monastic prayer. They took seriously Jesus' command to Peter, James, and John, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation." (Mark 15.38) They also took seriously the time indicators in today's gospel reading and began the practice of praying at the following times: Vespers (evening), Compline (before bed), Matins (during the night), Lauds (morning), Terce (c. 9:00 AM), Sext (c. noon), and None (c. 3:00 PM).

Today's gospel reading can suggest times that are symbolic of when we should be particularly attentive to God's reign breaking into our lives.

1. "in the evening" (The Last Supper) We should be on the watch during the Eucharist, especially when we say: "When we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory."
2. "at midnight" (agony in the garden and the arrest and religious trial of Jesus) We should be on the watch whenever we encounter people who are suffering, especially those who are suffering because of their convictions.
3. "at cockcrow" (Peter's betrayal and repentance) We should be on the watch when we are challenged to stand up for our beliefs or when we are conscious of having committed an injustice or betrayal.
4. "in the morning" (the handing over to Pilate) We should be on the watch whenever we exercise judgment over another person.

These times are symbolic – times to be attentive to the breaking in of God’s Reign in power and to be attentive to the opportunities to act for justice and peace. “What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”

In preparing these reflections, in addition to the biblical texts, I consulted the following works:

- Brown 1997 - Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 126-127. 149-167.
- Brueggemann et al. 1993 - Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year B*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 8-10.
- Fuller & Westberg 2006 – Reginald H. Fuller and Daniel Westberg, *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today*, Third Edition (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2006), 219-220.
- Funk et al. 1993 - Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, A Polebridge Press Book (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 114-115.
- LaVerdiere 1999.2 - Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel According to Mark*, Vol. 2 (Collegeville [MN]: Liturgical Press, 1999), 208-209.
- Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Second Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 207.
- Pilch 1996 - John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B*. A Liturgical Press Book (Collegeville [MN]: Liturgical Press, 1996), 1-3.
- Taylor 1959 – Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (London: Macmillan & Co. LTD, 1959), 522-524.
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