

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8; Psalm 80 [79]; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!

Mark 13:32 *“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”*

Mark 13:33 [Jesus said:] Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34 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. 35 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, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In the narrative of Mark, chapter 13 stands between the Jerusalem presence and disputes (chapters 11-12) and the Passion Narrative (chapters 14-16). It is often called the Markan Apocalypse or the Little Apocalypse. The lectionary omits v.32 but it is included here because it makes a more natural introduction to the warnings. If even the Son does not know, then *a fortiori* we need to be on the watch.

The writing here is apocalyptic, which requires very careful handling (see below). Apart from that, the threatening tone grates on our ears today. In general, apocalyptic is meant neither to be a prophecy nor a description of the future. It interprets the *present* and tries to promote conversion and steadfastness. Mark is meeting three situations: (i) it is probable that the communities for which the Gospel was written had experienced tribulation of some kind, with the consequent temptation to give up; (ii) complacency engendered by the apparent delay; (iii) feverish identification of the signs of the end. For Mark, the tribulations are the birth pangs of the end; his teaching is to be both steadfast and alert.

In Mark's narrative, the location is the



Mount of Olives in view of the Temple Mark 11:11, 15–16, 27; 12:35); the topic takes up issues anticipated Jesus's arrival in the Temple (11:1-10) and his judgment of it (12:1-11); the audience — Jesus, Peter, James, John and Andrew — reminds us of the opening scene of the Galilean ministry (1:16-20).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The best background for Mark 13 as a whole is the book of Daniel.

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14)

KIND OF WRITING

This is written in apocalyptic language. The best OT example is the book of Daniel and the best NT example is the Apocalypse, the book of Revelation. In general, an apocalypse interprets the present and, so to speak, “names the times we live in”. On foot of the description, certain attitudes or actions are taught, to help us live these times in an

Thought for the day

Beginning again is an invitation to look in two directions. What happened for me in the last year, both in my ordinary life and in my life as a believer, a person of faith? For what do I ask forgiveness? For what do I give thanks? We also look forward and the new beginning gives us a chance to start again on the Way of discipleship. Both thanksgiving and renewal are to be found in today's readings. The Gospel is an invitation to wake up, to keep watch, to live fully the present moment under God, in whom we live and move and have our being.

Prayer

Wake us up, O God, and rouse us from the slumber of the everyday that we may recognise you in every moment and in every person, today and every day of our lives.

authentic way. The great virtues are steadfastness (stickability!) and watchfulness.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(1) Context in Mark: it may help to notice that there are good links between all of chapter 13 and (i) the initial preaching of Jesus in Mark 1:14; (ii) the proclamation of the Kingdom in parables in Mark 4:1-34; and (iii) the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane in Mark 14:32-42.

(2) Mark 13 itself: the evangelist has gathered together disparate items of Jesus' teaching. It is likely that a certain amount of grouping of sayings had already taken place. We may notice some of the following similar themes:

- (a) Sayings on the distress of Israel: 14-18, 19-20
- (b) Sayings on the distress of the church: 9-13
- (c) Sayings on pseudo-messiahs and the true Messiah: 21, 14-16
- (d) Sayings on the *parousia* and watchfulness: 26-27, 34-36.

Mark was writing at the time of the Jew-

ish war with the Romans and end-time expectations were really high, in Palestine and elsewhere. He may have gathered the statements of Jesus together for the community at that time, to maintain alertness of spirit and to warn against potential false messiahs and the like. In its present state the chapter falls naturally into the following sections:

- (1) vv. 1–4, Introduction—prophecy of the temple’s doom and the disciples’ question;
- (2) vv. 5–23, the Tribulation of Israel and of the Church;
- (3) vv. 24–27, the *parousia* of the Son of Man and the Gathering of the People of God;
- (4) vv. 28–37, the Times of Fulfilment and Exhortations to Watchfulness.

Our excerpt comes from the very last section, inculcating certain attitudes for now. It thus takes up the themes of Christ the King and opens the season of Advent, with a tone of expectation, hope and preparation.

ST PAUL

1 Thessalonians 4:15-5:11 is very close to the atmosphere of Mark 13. It is a little too long to quote, so here is a shorter passage from Romans:

“Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (Romans 13:11-14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 32 Some of the force of the warning comes from the Son himself not knowing. Of course, this is a surprise to us today. However, there is preparation in Mark 10:40. Furthermore, as the early Christians tended to underline and

even increase Jesus’ knowledge, this saying is most likely original to Jesus himself. In later theological disputes, the Arians used this text.

Verse 33 Mark is teaching “watchfulness,” conscious living and engagement. It is a frequent idea in this chapter (vv. 5, 9 and 23). “Watch” creates links with Gethsemane.

Verse 34 This little parable gives a very everyday example and has a tendency to allegory: the man on the journey is the Lord; the slaves / servants are the Christians; the doorkeeper is any Christian, with the special duty of watchfulness; the return of the master is the Second Coming.

Verse 35 The final expansion spells it out very clearly, naming the potential times when the master may return. Mark, interestingly, uses the Roman divisions of the hours of the day, which may point to the location.

Verse 36 Sleep is commonly used to mean inattention, lack of alertness, as well as death. “Suddenly” increases the sense of threat involved.

Verse 37 This is the last sentence of the Little Apocalypse and makes a resounding conclusion, addressed explicitly to each and to all. Watch: 14:34, 37, 38.

Today we cannot excite artificially the feverish expectation of the early Christians. Probably we do not want to threaten people either. Nevertheless, the culture is a culture of distraction and it promotes unconscious living, inviting us to live on the surface and to be happy with the merely material. Perhaps there is an entry in that for the teaching of this passage. See the prayer below. We were not intended to sleepwalk through life!!

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

- 1. The coming of the master is not just the moment of death, but any moment of grace. Recall unexpected graces - good things that happened when they were not anticipated.
- 2. Times when you were particularly alert and aware of what was going on in you and around you and the contrast

with moments when that alertness and awareness was not present.

3. The servants were given charge of the household ‘each with their own job’. Identify with the servants as people given a responsibility within the household of God’s people. What has it been like for you when you have been shown trust in this way by another person? What is it like for you to see yourself trusted in this way by God?

4. Your experience of good ‘doorkeepers’, people who were there and ready to receive you even when you came at an awkward or unexpected time. Also your experience of being a good ‘doorkeeper’ for another.

5. Jesus says that what he is saying to his disciples he is saying to all. Have there been times when you have been a messenger of hope to others, encouraging them to wait for a moment of grace. Who have been the ones to encourage you?

PRAYER

Rend the heavens and come down, O God of all the ages!

Rouse us from sleep, deliver us from our heedless ways, and form us into a watchful people, that, at the advent of your Son, he may find us doing what is right, mindful of all you command.

Grant this through him, whose coming is certain, whose day draws near, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.



Advent Readings				Themes	
Advent 1	Is 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8	Ps 80 (79)	1 Cor 1:3-9	Mk 13:33-37	End of Time
Advent 2	Is 40:1-5, 9-11	Ps 85 (84)	2 Pet 3:8-14	Mk 1:1-8	John the Baptist
Advent 3	Is 61:1-2, 10-11	Magnificat	1 Thess 5:16-24	Jn 1:6-8, 19-28	John the Baptist
Advent 4	2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11,16	Ps 89 (88)	Rom 16:25-27	Lk 1:26-38	Mary

God will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ

1 Cor 1:1 *Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

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

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In Advent, all three readings focus on the same topic. Today, we reflect on the end of time, the last day. This is evident here because Paul mentions the “revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ”, the “end”, and the “day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The faithfulness of God is also part of that apocalyptic setting. Vv. 1-2 (added above) complete the greeting.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

It is known that Paul was in Corinth in the winter of AD 51 and the spring of 52. The letter is long because there are major issues in the Corinthian community, some of which are hinted at in this introductory thanksgiving. For example, competitiveness over the spiritual gifts (ch. 12-14) and their inability to believe or imagine that all will be raised in Christ at the end (ch. 15).

KIND OF WRITING

(i) This is a thanksgiving, present in all Paul’s letters except Galatians. He uses the thanksgiving to gain the attention, good will and receptivity of the Corinthians, by praying for them and by

praising their strengths (which, it turns out, can also be weaknesses).

(ii) At the same time, this passage reveals Paul as an apocalyptic Jew of the first century. Apocalyptic is both a kind of writing and worldview. Central to this worldview is the hope in God’s faithfulness and consequent belief in the resurrection, however that is imagined. The term apocalyptic and the worldview may seem foreign to us. However, it is a response to *the* question present in all faiths: how to continue faith in God with so much evil and suffering in the world.

RELATED PASSAGES

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1Corinthians 15:20–26)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 3 The greeting is pointed to the specific needs in Corinth: grace because all is gift, peace because of rivalry.

Verse 4 This typical introductory line is replicated elsewhere (1Thess 1:2; Rom 1:3 etc.). To know that someone prays for you is very heartwarming. However, Paul already anticipates the idea that their gifts are *not* their own, but come through the grace of God.

Verse 5 This is especially true in Corinth, where the spiritual gifts are evidently abundant *and prized*. For Paul’s considered reply, see ch. 12-14.

Verse 6 Why does he mention this? The noun is rare in Paul (here and in 2 Cor

1:12), while the verb is more common (Rom 3:21; 10:2; 1 Cor 15:15; 2 Cor 8:3; Gal 4:15). Possibly because in this letter Paul draws down the teaching tradition to instruct the Corinthians. See the Lord’s Supper in 11:23-26 and the creed in 15:3-5. NB for the resurrection and the end.

Verse 7 Notice that the spiritual gifts, to which they are so attached, are not intended to last for ever. On the contrary, as we read further on: *But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.* (1Corinthians 13:8). Instead, they are given *with a view to the end*, the revealing (lit. *apocalypse*) of Jesus. The end includes the resurrection of the body, a teaching which was difficult even then for some in the community.

Verse 8 Again, we notice that this strengthening is gift in view to what will happen at the end of time. It is implied, none too subtly, that the Corinthians need help to become/remain blameless.

Verse 9 The faithfulness of God is a key teaching of apocalyptic in general and Paul in particular. See Romans 3:21-26 in the NET translation. Again, the comment on fellowship (*koinōnia*; Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 1:9; 10:16; 2 Cor 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Gal 2:9; Phil 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Phlm 1:6) is at the heart of a Paul’s teaching and critically missing in Corinth evidently.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Looking at your own community of faith and indeed your being part of it, for what do you give thanks? What are the gifts God has bestowed on the community as a whole and on the individuals within it?

2. We are called into fellowship with others. Can I name what I receive as part of that fellowship and give thanks? Can I say—humbly!—what I bring to our fellowship?

3. God is faithful: perhaps at this point in my life, I need to be reminded of that? Perhaps I need to look at my own faithfulness and how I live it?

PRAYER

Faithful God, stay with us on the journey that we try to be faithful just as you are faithful, so that on the day of Lord Jesus Christ you may welcome us into fellowship with all the saints.

Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, you the potter

Isa 63:16 For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name. 17 Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.

Isa 64:1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— 3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4 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. 5 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. 6 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. 7 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. 8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is a very heart-felt prayer, expressing considerable distress, at a time when people were wondering (not for the last time) where is God is all of this?

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Second Isaiah (ch. 40-55) was written during the Babylonian Exile (587-539 BC) and Third Isaiah (ch. 56-66) after the return from Exile. The omitted verses 18 and 19 give us to understand that this prayer was written *after* the return from Exile but *before* the rebuilding of the Temple. A time of hopes dashed, then, not unlike our own historical moment in the church.

KIND OF WRITING

Once more, this is of course poetry, actually a psalm of lament, running from Is 63:7 to 64:12. Again, the poetry can

be enjoyed for its technique of saying things twice. Notice the relationship, for example, between these pairs of lines (parallelism, technically):

63:17 Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways *and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?*

The second line goes a bit deeper, into the cause of the straying: they did not ever fear / respect God, not to mention pray to him.

64:7 There is no one who calls on your name, *or attempts to take hold of you.*

Again, the second line goes deeper: they are not even trying!

The lectionary excerpt has a frame, at the start and at the end: “you are our Father.” This initial title expands into a wonderful description of God and those who believe in God. Notice that there are two sides each time.

GOD	ISRAEL
Lord, redeemer from of old, the liberator God of the Exodus (64:1-4), without equal, the potter	God’s servants, the tribe of God’s heritage, those who wait for him, those who right and remember God’s way.
God made the stray and hardened their hearts; God was angry and hid himself; God hid his face and delivered them to their enemies.	They strayed and no longer feared God; they sinned and transgressed; firth and unclean, faded like a leaf; iniquitous; no one calls on God

The surprise in all this is that it is God who is invited to “convert”!! God has to take some of the blame and the hope is that he will let his true self be seen again. The Hebrew word for “turn” is *shuv* and the range of meanings includes to turn around, to repent, to bring back, to refresh. When used of God it means to become devoted once more. It shows a certain courage to address God in these terms.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Woe to you who strive with your Maker,

earthen vessels with the potter! Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, “What are you making”? or “Your work has no handles”? (Isaiah 45:9)

Like clay in the hand of the potter, to be moulded as he pleases, so all are in the hand of their Maker, to be given whatever he decides. (Sirach 33:13)

Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? (Romans 9:21)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 16 Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (=Israel) are the physical “fathers”, but God is the real father of his people.

Verse 17 God is, in part, blamed for the present painful experience. NB 17cd.

Verse 1 Echo of the covenant on Sinai. “Tear” because of God’s urgency.

Verse 3 “We did not expect” points to the grace, the gift of the Exodus.

Verse 4 Body language for the “beyond” of God.

Verse 5 The first two lines are positive; the second two negative.

Verse 6 Graphic description of the present decline and instability.

Verse 7 Again, the first two lines describe the state of things, while the second two lines pinpoint the cause.

Verse 8 An echo the second creation story in Genesis 2.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Believers often long for a more tangible presence of God, a God who comes to meet us. What has been my experience of waiting for God?
2. Clay can be made into many things (see Rom 9:21). How open am I to God’s creativity in my own pilgrimage of faith?

PRAYER

God, our loving father, when we are absent to you and when you seem absent to us, come again, be close to us, and let us know your presence and action in our lives.

We place ourselves in your hands, we are the clay, you the potter.

We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8; Psalm 80 [79]; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

READINGS 1 AND 3

To be honest, the first reading doesn't quite fit the Gospel as neatly as usual. Vv. 3-5 come closest, with the tone of not expecting and waiting.

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 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. 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. (Isaiah 64:3-5)

How the waiting should unfold is found in v. 5: doing what is right, remembering his ways, in some fashion corresponding to the Gospel message "to stay awake."

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

There is a perfect fit between Isaiah and Psalm 80 (79). Psalm 80 mentions the catastrophic situation (vv. 5, 6, 12-13 and 16). It addresses God as shepherd of his people (v. 1) and vineyard owner (vv. 8-16).

Finally, it calls on God to restore Israel, in the refrain: *Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8

In this reading, written at a time of failed reconstruction, there is a frank acknowledgement that something has "gone wrong" in life and in relationship with God. What the prophet says is poetically expressed but very insistent.

Second reading

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Paul had a mixed relationship with the Corinthians. Nevertheless, here he thanks God for them and names the special gifts they have. He concludes with a prayer that they may remain steadfast in the faith, just as God himself is faithful to them.

Gospel

Mark 13:33-37

Advent begins with a wake up call. In our culture of busy-ness and distraction, there may be something here for us today.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 1 December

Isaiah 2:1-5

The Advent weekday readings open with a tremendous invitation to walk again in light of the Lord. The hope of turning swords into ploughshares has inspired a sculpture in front of the United Nations HQ in New York.

Tuesday 2 December

Isaiah 11:1-10

In Advent, people sometimes put up Jesse trees, which mark the days to Christmas and trace the ancestry of Jesus back to King David and his father Jesse. A lot of hope is portrayed in this reading, both in the first part and in the very poetic second part.

Wednesday 3 Dec *St Francis Xavier*

Isaiah 25:6-10

This reading is familiar from funerals, but not confined to those sad occasions. On the contrary, the invitation, open all the time, is full of joy and hope.

Thursday 4 Dec *St John Damascene*

Isaiah 26:1-6

At times we all wonder, does God really care? Using the image of a city, a place of safety and protection, Isaiah invites us again to trust God, our rock, always faithful.

Friday 5 December

Isaiah 29:17-24

At a time when the community of the faithful was feeling dejected and even abandoned, Isaiah spoke words of encouragement. God, says Isaiah, will come again and make his presence felt.

Saturday 6 Dec *St Nicholas of Myra*

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26

Isaiah lifts up the hearts of those who

hear him, using farming images very close to the experience of the ordinary people. The very end of the reading portrays God as a nurse, dressing the wounds of his people.

WEEKDAY REFLECTIONS

Commenting on the faith of the centurion in the day's Gospel taken from St Matthew (8:5-11), Pope Francis observed: "The Lord marvelled at the centurion. He marvelled at his faith. The centurion made a journey to meet the Lord, but he made it in faith. He not only encountered the Lord, but he came to know the joy of being encountered by him. And this is precisely the sort of encounter we desire, the encounter of faith. To encounter the Lord, but also to allow ourselves to be encountered by him. This is very important".

Advent is a time truly to open our minds and hearts to him, "because when he comes to me, he may tell me what he wants me to do, which is not always what I want him to tell me". It is important, therefore, that we never forget that "he is the Lord and he will tell me what he intends for me". "The Lord," he said, "does not look upon us all at once, as a mass of people: no, no! He looks at us one by one, in the face, in the eyes, for true love is not something abstract but rather something very concrete. Person to person. The Lord, who is a Person, looking at me, a person. That is why allowing the Lord to come and meet me also means allowing him to love me".

Pope Francis concluded: "in the prayer at the beginning of Mass we asked for the grace to make this journey with several dispositions that will aid us. Perseverance in prayer: to pray more. Diligence in fraternal charity: to draw closer to those in need. And joy in praising the Lord. Let us begin this journey in prayer, charity and praise, so that the Lord might come to meet us, but let us allow him to meet us with our defences down, in openness!"

*Pope Francis
6 December 2013*

(Edited version)