

You don't believe the sky is falling until a chunk of it falls on you.

The testaments / Margaret Atwood. 2019

Related topics

For further study:

Advent; Christ's coming (past, present, and future); eschatology; parousia; soteriology; manifestation; paschal mystery; conversion; heaven and hell

Closing Prayer

Almighty God,
 give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
 and to put on the armour of light,
 now in the time of this mortal life,
 in which your Son Jesus Christ
 came to us in great humility;
 that on the last day,
 when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
 to judge the living and the dead,
 we may rise to the life immortal;
 through him who is alive and reigns with you,
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and for ever.

Common Worship · Advent 1²

CPL • LBC Year B Advent 1.odt • 2020-10-11

² Probably from the *Gelasian Sacramentary*, and a modernised form of the version in the 1549 *BCP*. It draws on Romans 13 (the Epistle for Year A) for the imagery of waking from sleep, putting off the works of darkness, and putting on the armour of light.

The First Sunday of Advent

(Sunday between 27 November and 3 December inclusive)

Principal Service readings

Isaiah 64.1-9	Reflection on God's anger and mercy
Psalm 80.1-8, 18-20 [or 80.1-8]	Plea for restoration
1 Corinthians 1.3-9	Strengthened through Christ until the day he is revealed
Mark 13.24-37	Keep alert for the coming of the Lord

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
 speak to our hearts in the stillness,
 keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
 lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
 and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The coming of the Son of Man

Jesus said to his disciples: ²⁴In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It 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. ³⁵Therefore, 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, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Mark 13.24-37 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

Mark 13 is often referred to as the 'Little Apocalypse (as opposed to the book of Revelation or 'Great Apocalypse'). The word 'apocalypse' means 'revelation', and as a literary form an apocalypse purports to reveal the mysteries of the future or of the heavenly realm. Some apocalypses, like Mark 13, describe the course of history as well as a climactic cosmic transformation. Since their content often concerns the 'last things' (death, resurrection, judgement, the afterlife), apocalypses also deal with 'eschatology' (the study of the 'last things'). In Mark's apocalypse Jesus acts as the revealer of the future and of the heavenly realm.

In the first part of the discourse (13.1-13) the setting is described and Jesus labels impersonators of him, as well as wars, earthquakes and famines as only the 'beginning of the birth pangs' (13.5-8), and goes on to warn his followers to expect persecution (13.9-13). In the second part he deals with the 'great tribulation' and the 'appalling abomination' (13.14-20), and warns against being led astray by false messiahs and false prophets. In the third part (13.24-27) Jesus describes the cosmic portents that will lead to the triumphant manifestation of the glorious Son of Man and the vindication of the 'elect'. The final section (13.28-37) is an exhortation consisting of parables and sayings.

The big question about Mark's material is where does he get it all from? Is it from the Old Testament such as Daniel and Jewish apocalypses like 4 Esdras? Some elements are clearly biblical quotations, others are very likely the voice of Jesus and the voice of Christians in Mark's community, and still others reflect Mark's distinctive vocabulary and style.

Apocalyptic writings are sometimes called the 'literature of the dispossessed'. They arise among oppressed and alienated people who have little chance of fighting back against people of power or gaining political, military or economic influence. The book of Daniel is like this,

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originating with a Jewish group around 165 BC that opposed the programme of the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who wanted to transform the temple into a place of worship for Baal Shamin (the 'Lord of Heaven'). Their belief was based on the hope that the God of Israel would eventually vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked.

Mark's 'Little Apocalypse' addressed Christians who have suffered and can expect to suffer more for their faith (see 13.9-13). The short-term answer as to why they suffer is to do with their fidelity to Jesus and his message of God's unfolding plan. This approach affirms the omnipotence and justice of God but defers their full manifestation to the future revelation of God's kingdom. The present sufferings, then, are to be endured with patience and the hope of ultimate vindication by God.

It is difficult to say what the Old Testament phrases and Jewish apocalyptic imagery meant to Mark, and what they might mean for readers today. How literally did Mark take them? The basic problem is that the kingdom of God is a transcendent entity. In talking about it we are forced to use imaginative language, but its reality and its fullness remain to be discovered – they are beyond the limits of human thought and speech.

Despite his apocalyptic descriptions Mark punctuates the text with warnings, advising people to 'beware, take heed' – don't get carried away. Mark seems to want to instil constant vigilance – 'no one knows the day or hour' (13.32) – and also to prevent excessive speculation – 'I have told you everything beforehand' (13.23).

Quotations

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If things happening is the litmus test for a soon-coming rapture, it's no wonder every generation for many years have believed they were the last generation. Bad things happen in every generation.

Jesus wins: the end times are better than you think / J.A. Hardgrave. 2018