Sermon for 1st in Advent Year B

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

i

Our passage today from Mark 13:24-37 is like a Hollywood disaster movie. The passage is known as ‘the Little Apocalypse’ as it uses the familiar symbols of impending death, disaster and judgement to warn the Christian community of the seriousness of the decision they are facing in following Christ or not. The symbols that were familiar in Jesus’ time are not so familiar today. They are taken in a woodenly unimaginatively literal way by some, and airily dismissed as myths from the past by others. What are we to make of them?

Hollywood has used the modern equivalents of Mark 13. Impending death and disaster are all around from aliens, meteor strikes, new killer viruses and climate catastrophe, but any moral judgement upon humanity tends to be overlooked.

Occasionally moral aspects are detectable such as speeches about world unity and a renewed commitment to care for the planet even in recent Hollywood offerings. So the first *Independence Day* movie has a heart-warming vision of world peace and cooperation being forged in the life or death struggle with the invading aliens and the *Day After Tomorrow* endorses the voice of those who are calling for greater commitment to care for planet earth. But in many movies, there is little moral judgement and we are left simply to admire the courage and ingenuity of humanity which fits better with today’s secular humanist views.

A moral judgement, however, must be involved in any ultimate reckoning. That applies to the ultimate reckoning for humanity as a whole, but it also applies to any ultimate reckoning of any individual life. For those of us who believe in God, that reckoning is made against what our creator has deemed the purpose of human life to be and the manner in which human life is to be lived. For those that do not believe in God there still has to be a moral aspect to our ultimate reckoning of humanity for we are at the very least answerable to future generations for how we have lived and what we have bequeathed them – from ecological threats, to political instabilities or questionable ethical and political values.

However uncomfortable, moral judgement will not simply disappear. As creatures who can exercise choice, we can never escape a judgement call about the worthiness of our choices – whether we believe we are answerable to God or to just future generations.

ii

Our passage from Isaiah 64:1-9 is an interesting example of judgmental imagery. This passage comes from the period when the exiles have been promised their release from Babylon and the time when Judah is being rebuilt. The time of the nation’s punishment is over. A new dawn of hope is breaking and the exiles are going home.

You might expect Isaiah to be full of thanksgiving at this point; full of reassurances that the slate of the people’s sins has been wiped clean through their years of exile. It should be a renewed and chastened Judah that is reborn, yet the whole of what is commonly called Trito-Isaiah or Third Isaiah is actually full of gloom about the nation’s sinfulness and impending judgement. It is as if the Exile has accomplished nothing. Isaiah is still very pessimistic about the true righteousness of the people. In this short passage Isaiah laments that “All of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (v6). That can hardly have been what the people wanted to hear after all their years of hardship. Yet they are still carried away by their sins like the wind that sweeps away old leaves.

Within this lament hangs a pregnant question: How then can we be saved? If even the years of exile have not enabled the people to overcome their sin, just what can be done?

Isaiah then strikes a note of hope. He points out that we are the clay in God’s hands. We have been fashioned the way we are by God. This must mean that God has an ultimate purpose for us, and because God is good, the assumption is that ultimately God must be able to deal with our sins and not remain “angry with us beyond measure” (v8). The fact that we are God’s people gives Isaiah some hope that ultimately God must have an answer to the phenomenon of human sin.

iii

Passages like the whole chapter of Mark 13 proclaim the Christian belief that God’s ultimate answer to human sin has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

The scale of Jewish vocabulary on judgement has expanded greatly between the days of Isaiah and Mark’s gospel. This style of literature is called apocalyptic because it speaks in terrifying images of the apocalypse at the end of time. New elements have entered the lexicon of Jewish imagery; since the days of the Maccabean Revolt in the 160’s BC when the Jews rebelled against their Greek overlords, the concept of the ‘Son of Man’ has entered the picture. This figure plays a significant role in the *Book of Daniel* that emerged from that time. The figure of Satan plays a more prominent role too, so that humanity is seen as caught up in a cosmic spiritual struggle between Good and Evil.

It is as if human choices alone cannot fully explain the depth and persistence of human sin- Jewish theologians increasingly came to believe that human choice was part of a larger cosmic battle into which people were drawn. Part of the rescue, therefore, became the defeat of Satan and breaking the power of evil to ensnare human hearts. A warrior hero who would come one day to defeat Satan and break the shackles of evil and death developed into a belief in a future Messiah.

Jesus took three strands of such thinking and plaited them together in a new and unexpected way. He took Daniel’s ‘Son of Man’ and Isaiah of Babylon’s ‘Suffering Servant’ and apocalyptic literature’s ‘Messiah’ to produce his own version of all three combined: the divine Messiah who takes on human flesh and blood and defeats Satan not by the sword but by suffering on the cross and rising beyond death to ultimate victory.

The few verses we have heard today from Mark 13:24-27 give us taste of this. The choice whether you are for Jesus or against Jesus is a matter of life or death; it is the ultimate decision of your life. Join with Jesus and you will share the victory he alone can secure over sin, evil and death and then when he returns you shall be gathered into his kingdom to share his life for ever. This is what God’s intention has always been – to know and love God our creator for ever. Human sin is the inevitable result of giving humans free will, but without free will there can be no love and without love, God’s whole purpose in creation is thwarted. But God himself has had a plan in mind to deal with this conundrum from the beginning, when, according to John’s gospel, the Word was with God and the Word was God and that Word has now come into the world in Christ.

It is doubtful whether the Jews understood any scientific truth behind their imagery of the sun and stars turning to blackness. Today we know that one day the sun and the moon will cease to shine and the stars shall go out. The Jews knew that was true even then for every mortal human being, whatever the scientific truths of the matter. One day, the sun will go out for each of us.

Whether we are gathered in to the kingdom of light, or remain in the blackness, depends upon our choosing or rejecting of God’s free offer in Jesus Christ.

Such talk is acceptable in evangelical Church circles today, but is increasingly unwelcome in the secular West. We Christians who inhabit the West must refrain from tailoring our gospel to fit what is currently acceptable to society. We must be prophetic. But if we get too tangled up in the lurid details of apocalyptic imagery, we will end up pushing the secular world even further away from Christ.

Yet to allow people to believe that there is no moral responsibility to human life for which each must give an account is pure cowardice. We need to keep the concept of moral responsibility alive. To those that resolutely refuse to believe there is any God to whom they must answer one day, let us at least remind them of their responsibilities to generations yet to come.

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**February 2017**