Sermon for 33rd in Ordinary Year B

Readings: Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-14; Mark 13:1-8

i

*Daniel* is Resistance material. Imagine the underground presses in occupied Europe printing news and articles against the occupying Nazi forces and you get the flavour of the *Book of Daniel*. It is a story of past heroism in the face of terrible torture and suppression when Daniel and his faithful compatriots stand firm, despite the pressure from their Persian overlords, to renounce their faith, at least for a period of 30 days (Dan 6:7). Unwilling to compromise his loyalty to his God, even for thirty days, Daniel keeps on praying and is thrown into the lions’ den.

The story of Daniel’s heroic faith and ultimate salvation by God is retold in the 169-164BC period when the Jews were suffering great losses at the hands of their Greek overlord, Antiochus Eiphanes (meaning “God is manifest) which the Jews twisted into “Epimanes” (meaning “mad”).

The story obviously helped inspire resistance, because Judah Maccabeus and his family successfully led a four-year rebellion which ended when Antiochus died in 164BC. During the revolt, Antiochus had burnt copies of the Torah, circumcision became a capital offence for both the male child and the mother, and all religious feasts and sacrifices were outlawed.

Many pious Jews were slaughtered and so the subject of enduring unmerited suffering and martyrdom took on special significance. The notion that God would ultimately vindicate such faithful people by restoring them to life after death took on a new potency.

Daniel 12:1-3 speaks of the hope of resurrection for the righteous dead. It speaks of God’s heavenly warriors, the angels, like arch-angel Michael, fighting unseen in the heavenly realm against the spiritual forces of evil who inspire their earthly protagonists. It is not the case that faithful people are losing their lives and God isn’t doing anything about it, but God has already sent his heavenly legions into battle on behalf of the faithful and those who meanwhile fall in the conflict can stand firm because of the promise of future resurrection.

Angels and life after death barely figure in pre-exilic parts of the Bible, but from this period onwards take on an increasingly important role. So that by the time of Jesus, the idea of angelic visitations and resurrection of the dead is standard Jewish belief, but since the Sadducees could find no reference to resurrection within the Books of Moses, the Torah, they refused to accept the idea because it had been introduced in later prophetic writings.

The Book of Life mentioned in Daniel 12:1 reappears in the NT, especially in Rev 20:12-15. It is the Book which contains the names of those who have been faithful and who will rise again to eternal life.

*Daniel* has played its part in inspiring faithful people through times of terrible suffering many times since the days of Judah Maccabaeus; it has been a book of hope for many Jews through the many pogroms they have suffered in many places since those days. It sounds a weak, but nonetheless unconquerable rallying cry of hope even in the overwhelmingly tragic days of the Holocaust. It sounds the same note of hope to Christians too as they have suffered in their turn for their faith. Jesus never promised a free ride to the gates of heaven, but warned us clearly that following him means taking up one’s cross and following the path our Master took, with the same hope in our hearts for our ultimate victory over death and sin that was in Christ’s heart as he dragged his cross to Golgotha.

ii

Our passage today from Hebrews 10:11-14 has a similar theme to Daniel. Jesus has done all that is necessary. He is now the eternal high priest because the sacrifice he has made has been efficacious and nothing further is required. The victory over evil and death has been secured. However, verse 13 explains that “since that time [of victory on the cross and his ascension in glory to God’s right hand], he **waits** for his enemies to be made his footstool.”

This notion of the victory being secure, but the battle continuing, is the theme of several passages in the NT. It is the theme, for example, of the *Parable of the Wheat and Tares* in Matthew 13:24-30. In that parable we read that the wheat and the tares grow side by side, but that must remain so for now:

The servants asked him, ’Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling up the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’

The *Letter to the Hebrews* alludes to the same topic earlier in its discourse:

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him (Heb 2:8).

The age of the Church is the in-between time, the time between the cross and resurrection of Christ and the final Judgement Day. Whilst evil has been defeated on the cross, the decisive battle won, the war itself rages on for a while yet. After today’s passage which establishes Christ’s ultimate victory, the *Letter to the Hebrews* continues to its conclusion with chapters of exhortation to stand firm in the face of suffering like their Jewish forbears had done, and ends with warnings about what awaits those who do not stand firm and surrender their faith in the face of danger.

iii

Mark 13 is known as the ‘little apocalypse’ because it is in the style of the *Book of Daniel* which is a prime example of this style of scripture. It is called apocalyptic because the focus is upon future vindication despite present suffering; its style is to employ cryptic images, strange symbolism and talks chiefly of the ‘end things’ when the world shall end, and the wicked receive their deserved punishment and the righteous their deserved reward. The *Book of Revelation* is the NT’s main example of apocalyptic literature. ‘Apocalyptic’ means to ‘unveil’ – it purports to ‘unveil’ the future mysteries that will come to pass at the end of time.

Most preachers shun the challenge of preaching on the strange symbolism of apocalyptic scripture, but religious demagogues tend to love it because they can manipulate its opaque imagery into what they want it to mean. Those who live from one forecast for the date of the Day of Judgement to the next revel in such passages. Barely a week goes by even in this age that the popular press does not have the latest barmy prediction for the end of the world cooked up by someone sifting through *Daniel* or *Revelation.*

My reading of Jesus’ advice in Mark 13:1-8 which introduces the ‘little apocalypse’ is that Jesus urges his disciples to be cautious and on their guard against trickery. But the passage does affirm the general notion that salvation will come only after terrible times of suffering have been endured. Jesus just cautions us not to assume that every such time of hardship is the prelude to the Day of Judgement.

Clearly, there are many episodes of suffering, war and disaster to be endured before God is ready to bring the curtain down on human history.

Jesus reinterprets the apocalyptic expectations of his day. Many had believed the Messiah was imminent and were intentionally searching for him. Anna and Simeon at the temple hoping to see the salvation of Israel were by no means isolated incidents. There had been some would-be messiahs already before Jesus, and others would follow in his immediate wake.

Most of those who waited for the messiah took on a zealot-inspired interpretation that the messiah would be a military leader who would rise up and become the new high priest and king of Israel and lead the people to freedom from imperial Rome, which was the new Babylon. There were many who wanted Jesus to be such a messiah.

However, Jesus brings a new and unexpected twist to this scheme of what God planned for the immediate future. Jesus suggested that the real Babylon was not Rome, but Jerusalem. Rome would be the agent of God’s punishment and would become the new centre of faith for the world.

A storm was brewing and Jesus predicts that soon not one stone of the mighty temple will remain on another. This is because they have looked for the wrong sort of messiah and failed to recognise the true messiah who is among them. But Jesus will build a new house or temple of the Lord, not on the shifting sands of contemporary Judaism, but on the solid rock of a renewed and re-interpreted Judaism, the solid rock of faith in his death and resurrection.

Such a new temple, not built with human hands, will withstand many storms and many wars. Christians, the new priestly people of God, must stand firm to the end whatever the world throws at them. The new temple is secure and their life in heaven with Christ is secure. That is the faith with which Christians face a world in turmoil.

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