

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

There is a clear apocalyptic theme in today's readings, which means the prophecy of Daniel and Jesus contain revelations – usually the product of dreams and/or visions. The Greek *apokalypsis* means an uncovering or revealing. The popular understanding of 'apocalypse' as a catastrophe or end-of-the-world idea may well be the subject of the revelations but it is not essential.

Daniel 12:1-13 Named after its main character, Daniel (Heb. *dani* = my judge, *el* = God), this is the youngest book in the Hebrew canon. The unknown author set the book in the 500s BC, the period of the Babylonian exile, and presents his folklore hero, Daniel, as a representative of the superiority of Israel's religion and wisdom. The book describes the desecration of the Jerusalem temple by the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes and his attempt to suppress Judaism in 167 BC. This suggests the book was written before the death of Antiochus in 164. This invasion and the Jewish resistance led by the Maccabee family is detailed in the books of Maccabees.

Today's reading fits with the intention of Daniel 10-12 to give support and reassurance to the persecuted Jews by promising victory, led by the archangel Michael, and resurrection for those who remain loyal to their faith. In fact, this is probably the earliest reference to belief in resurrection in Judaism. In Daniel 10:3 Michael (Heb. *mi* = who, *kha* = like, *el* = God) 'who-is-like-God', was given the task of looking after the Jewish people and coming to their aid. This text is part of the message of encouragement to endure and keep the faith to those who face difficult times.

We all owe it to our fellow human beings to give good example

The last sentence in this reading encapsulates the traditional Jewish respect for learning and teaching and it expresses the special reward reserved for those who instruct others in right living and the practice of goodness. There is a strong message here about the value of example as a medium of instruction. We all owe it to our fellow human beings to give good example, not by grandstanding, but by the solid integrity of our lives.

Psalms 16 This is the song of one who has been converted from the agricultural rituals of Canaanite religion to the worship of the Hebrew God. The psalmist is convinced that death could not separate him from God and he is expressing a belief that has turned into complete confidence.

The early Christians drew hope from this psalm along with a faith in Jesus who, for them, was living forever. The faith that death could not conquer depended on a love that could shine beyond the grave.

Hebrews 10:11-14, 18 The author's argument in Hebrews is that the sacrifices offered by the Levitical priesthood were not effective in removing sin, whereas the perfect offering that Jesus made of himself on the cross did take away sin. This does not mean there is no longer any sin, but the point is those who devote themselves to Jesus are in a position to escape the effects of sin through their life of commitment. This is why the author makes a plea to his community for endurance and ongoing faithfulness.

It is important to note that Jesus himself respected the liturgy and the personal offerings that were part of his beloved Judaism. Briefly put, the writer is not denying the continuity that exists between the old covenant and its fulfilment in the new. But he is emphasising the fact that Jesus has put the icing on the cake, as it were.

Mark 13:24-32 Chapter 13 of Mark is often referred to as the 'Little Apocalypse' because the words of Jesus are a revelation of events that will occur at the future end of the world. A time of suffering and hardship is due to come before the end, but those who have committed themselves to Christ will be saved from destruction. It is clear that this chapter has been inspired by the words from Daniel that we encountered in the first reading.

This chapter of Mark has been noticeably influenced by ancient prophecy. The language of the sun and moon being darkened and the stars falling from the sky is found in Isaiah 13:10, 34:4, Ezekiel 32:7-8 and elsewhere in biblical prophecy. These expressions are meant to describe cosmic events that mark the Lord's intervention to punish lands and empires that were enemies of Israel. It is typical of ancient Israelite belief that Israel was God's favourite and as such would benefit from divine protection.

The description of the Son of Man coming in power and glory as God's envoy is also straight from the apocalyptic visions in the book of Daniel. The phrase 'son of man' is a Hebrew expression that simply means a human being; *ben adam* in Hebrew and *bar enash* in Aramaic. The Son of Man figure in Daniel has the role of saving the elect, those committed to the values of the reign of God, from destruction. This Son of Man will come on the clouds in power and glory in contrast to the four beasts in Daniel who will come from the sea. Mark emphasises the special nature of this human figure by telling us he has the power to send angels to gather in the chosen ones from wherever they may be scattered.

In view of the fact that the ancient Hebrews did not have a cosmological knowledge of space and the universe like modern astronomers we cannot take these prophetic signs literally. These are expressions from the poetry of mythology that are trying to depict a universe disintegrating at the end of time, the biblical 'day of the Lord'. Questions we might ask about what will actually happen really don't fit into our reading of this Scripture and the question about when all this will take place is answered by Jesus himself who admits he does not know.

The parable of the fig tree refers to reading the signs of the time. When the green leaves of the fig tree appear it is a sign that a better season is about to begin: summer is near. Mark's community of the early 70s AD may well have interpreted this as an approaching overthrow of the dominion of Rome. Who knows? But what they were aware of is that their temple had just been destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. They may have seen this as the beginning of the signs of destruction.

Being ready is an action not a feeling

In any case, Jesus is urging his followers to be awake and ready so as not to be taken by surprise. It is clear that he saw his message to his people as of prime importance and that those who rejected it would bring down trouble on their own heads.

Our takeaway could well be a resolution to do our best today to prepare for tomorrow. The 18th century polymath and statesman, Benjamin Franklin, said, 'By failing to prepare you're preparing to fail.' Jesus is talking about being mentally, physically and spiritually prepared for whatever may take place. Being ready is an action not a feeling. It is accepting the unknown but doing our best to grow to our potential in integrity and compassion in all our relationships.

A goal without a plan is a wish.

Anonymous

Mrs. Brownlow-Smythe was making final arrangements for an elaborate reception. 'Nora,' she said to her longtime servant, 'for the first half-hour I want you to stand at the drawing-room door and call the guests' names as they arrive.'

Nora's face lit up. 'Thank you, ma'am,' she replied. 'I've been wanting to do that to some of your friends for the last 20 years.'

Laurie Woods