

Some reflections on the readings for this coming Sunday, the Second Sunday before Advent

Dear sisters and brothers,

The readings for this coming Sunday have a strange 'feel' about them, a sense of foreboding. In the Old Testament and Gospel readings we have the language of apocalyptic. While in popular use today the word tends to mean something threatening, destructive and final, in its original and biblical meaning, apocalypse is about revealing something new. Apocalyptic language sought to shake people out of their reliance on conventional wisdom and make room for a new vision. In the context of our themes this Sunday that means a new vision of peace and justice for our world, a future inhabited by God and not by fear.

Apocalypse is not about the end of the world, but the end of the 'worlds' (the systems) that we have created and have become overly attached to. This thinking should help us get our focus right on Remembrance Sunday. We remember the horrors, the tragedies and the sacrifices of the past, which, sadly, are still with us, to spur us on to create a new and better world, one that God intends for human beings to enjoy and share together in peace.

Daniel 12: 1 – 3

The book of Daniel is the last book of the Old Testament to have been written (c.166BC). Its background is the struggle of the Jews to maintain their religion against the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (who ruled 175 – 164BC) to stamp it out. It is an early example of a popular Jewish form of writing called apocalyptic (the book of Revelation is a later Christian version) which was intended to encourage those being persecuted, stressing the unlimited power of God which would protect those who remained faithful. The character Daniel may be based on a long past sage called Danel, mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel but of whom nothing is really known. Or he may be some authoritative figure from the Exile period (597 – 538BC) around whom legends had grown. Or he may be simply a creation of ancient Jewish folklore. Today's short passage is notable because it is the earliest clear biblical statement of belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Psalm 16

A song of gratitude for God's unfailing care through this life and beyond. Without explicitly mentioning resurrection or immortality, the psalmist expresses faith in the continual joy of God's presence always and for ever.

Hebrews 10: 11 – 14 & 19 – 25

Just as musicians rehearse for the big concert and athletes for the big race or other sporting event will repeat their practice again and again in preparation for the big day, they know that these work-ups are preparatory and only a shadow of the real thing. With an audience steeped in Jewish Temple practices, the writer wants to show that, similarly, the Temple rituals performed by priests were only a preparation for the one eternally effective sacrifice that would end all need for sacrifices. The writer stresses that Christ is that final and effective sacrifice opening the door to a new relationship with God and a new life that has thus far only been experienced in shadows. Christians are urged to support one another in living the life of the new Kingdom and enjoying its benefits, because these have been won for us at the greatest cost possible.

Mark 13: 1 – 8

Mark, the first written Gospel is a wartime Gospel. The war was between the empire that ruled his world and the people from whom Jesus came and who had been given the promises of God. Mark is writing in the year 70AD (or shortly thereafter), the year of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans. Mark 13 begins with the followers of Jesus marvelling at the magnificence of the Temple and its huge stones. But Jesus warns them that it will all be cast down and tells of what will 'soon happen' – wars and rumours of wars, suffering and persecution, the birth pangs of the end. The first Christians expected 'the end' to come soon, perhaps in their lifetimes. It did not come as expected. But throughout the ages Christians have been tempted to see wars and catastrophes as somehow fulfilling biblical prophecies about 'the end.'

We can certainly understand that in the year 70, Christians, the majority of whom were Jews, must have seen the destruction of the Temple as the end of everything they knew. But, of course, it was not the end, certainly not the end of the world, but rather a new beginning. The appearance of the Gospels from this time was surely a message that God was still with his people, and in the coming of Jesus Christ, his teaching and healing works, his death and resurrection, there was a new hope for humanity to be found in embracing a radically different pathway through this life, and with it the promise of eternity. If Mark, and this chapter in particular, appears to be a doomsday message it is surely influenced by the fearful time in which it is written. Mark is the first Gospel. The complete Gospel narrative of hope and renewal was still being written. The new Temple, consisting not of stones and bricks but of the Christian people themselves, was still at the foundation stage. This new Temple is still being built today.

A prayer for this Sunday:

Lord, God of hope, you have saved us in the past. You have given us your Son Jesus Christ to guide us in the present and our future lies in your hands. As the fruit of our worship today, help us to seek this future as a challenge to be creative and to build up a new world by the power of Jesus Christ, who will complete your work in us and who lives with you and with us for ever. Amen.

Wishing you every blessing for Sunday and the week ahead.

With my love and prayers,

John