Homily for the 1st Sunday of Advent – Year B

By Fr Anthony Egan SJ

We are called to watch and be on our guard. To wait. How are we to watch? We look forwards by looking backwards. Today we begin the season of Advent when we look forwards to an event that has already happened, the birth of Christ. And in doing this we are watchful, we are alert! To the signs of the times, to their challenges and to the way in which we too must be alert.

Read, as we did, out of context, the power of today’s Gospel is a bit diminished. Why is Jesus having one of these ‘ominous moments’ of his? In many Protestant churches that use the Revised Common Lectionary, today’s Gospel begins a bit earlier in Mark chapter 13, starting at verse 24. In this section Jesus calls on readers to see the signs of the times – conflict, crisis, even weather and the changing seasons. I think it’s a pity we don’t read the full text. (I recommend you take a bit of time after Mass and read the whole thing). Stay with me for a bit. It gives us a deeper sense of context, this passage that we haven’t read. It sets the scene for what we have read. It asks the question: Why does Jesus say all this stuff about being alert? Now in order to explain it I’m going to have to do a bit of history, so please bear with me! Most scholars conclude that the Gospel of Mark was written around the time of the Jewish Revolt against the Roman Empire in around the years 66-70 CE. They suggest that many of the words of Jesus in this chapter Mark 13 – which is sometimes called the ‘little apocalypse’ – are probably words put into Jesus’ mouth by the author, based perhaps on warnings he may have made about what might come. In Jesus’ time after all there had been at least one major revolt (in the year 6 CE, when he was between about ten and thirteen years old). And that revolt had been crushed, rather violently.

So Jesus was no stranger to difficult times, times I suggest not unlike our own.

During Jesus’ ministry there may have been many incidents of low level resistance, mostly in the form of banditry – after all remember old Barabbas and the two thieves at the Crucifixion. Assassinations – of Roman soldiers and collaborators – also certainly happened, the works of so-called sicarii or ‘daggermen’. (Now some scholars even suggest that Judas Iscariot may have had ties to this group – his surname Iscariot could be a play on the word sicarius). There folks were also members of an ultra-nationalist religious movement called the Fourth Philosophy (after the ideas of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes), that would in fact lead the revolt of the 60s at which time this gospel would be written – and at the point they were called ‘Zealots’. And if you remember the Gospel at least one disciple is called Simon the Zealot. And there are the two brothers, the sons of Thunder, Boanerges, who could also have been connected to this movement. The fact that Jesus had such followers could indicate that he did not actually exclude this group, rather his was an all-inclusive movement in which all strands of Jewish thought were welcome – plus anyone else who cared to join, including the social outcasts, religious heretics, and God-help-us, even the Romans. So Jesus’ vision was not
narrowly nationalist but universal. His vision included everyone, and particularly as he’s the Second Person of the Trinity, this vision spans the whole of human history. His mission was not a narrowly national liberation but a universal liberation. In religious language we call it God’s kingdom or the reign of God.

“So what has this to do with Advent?” you might say?

Well, each year we celebrate Jesus’ birth, not as we do a normal birthday – after all, we have actually no idea of what day he was born, indeed we have no record of birth certificate or anything; so we assign a day to remind us of his birth, Christmas Day. It’s a bit like the British Monarchy, they have an actual birthday and then they have an official birthday. Above all, we celebrate a season of preparation at this time, we look forward by looking backwards – because of who Jesus was, who Jesus became. After all, Christmas would be meaningless without the Resurrection. And we can think of neither without looking back over the whole of Salvation history, from creation onwards. Onwards, indeed, to our present day, and to our future that is, for all of us, pretty much unclear.

We after all are a part of that history, often a very difficult part since we often make a mess of things, as Isaiah reminds us and the historical background against which Mark was writing reminds us. As the highest part of creation – at least on this little planet – we are all too often the ones who fail the most. Many of us I suspect see in our present times a multitude of terrible and depressing features: pandemic, war, conflict, factionalism, ecological crisis, the tendency even to attack those unlike ourselves – made even more vicious by toxic social media and a mentality of excluding people because of race, nationality, social class, sexuality or gender. And faced with all this, I do not know about you but I think we need a Saviour now!

In the first reading, Isaiah begs God to help his people to move beyond their failures. Jesus’ ministry of inclusion is similarly a call to put aside our factionalism embracing a new, universal sense of community. (Clearly the author of Mark saw it as all too necessary at a time when things were, in his time, falling apart). We look at a present, faced with its challenges we ask: where is our salvation? Paul in 1 Corinthians offers us a challenging answer: in the Risen Christ it is there, within you. You just have to access it. Embrace it. Act on it.

And how do we access this Risen Christ? Well we access it in the story of an obscure 1st century Jewish peasant, whose actual birthday is unknown, so much so that we have assigned him a birthday. Whose vision is so expansive that it transcends even today our own self-made divisions. We from our present situation must look backwards to look forwards. We look backwards to Jesus while we look forward to Christmas. We look to the complexity of the past to see in it models for a more human future. For us, as Christians, Jesus is that model, that useful past, that hopeful future.