

Second Sunday before Advent

Daniel 12:1-3

Psalm 16

Hebrews 10: 11-25

Mark 13:1-8

It is over twenty years since my family and I visited America for the first time, but I remember it vividly. Standing, for the first time on American soil, on the John F Kennedy beach in Massachusetts, I reflected that the 3000 miles of ocean separating me from Europe and everything that was familiar represented, until our lifetime, a journey of a week that was probably only ever made once in a lifetime - and for many people only in one direction. From there, the ancient civilizations, the empires, the rivalry, the wars of the Old World seemed completely irrelevant. I was in the New World. And the gap between the two was wide and as deep as the Atlantic Ocean.

Suddenly the US determination to shake off British rule, the US passion for the right to bear arms, the US determination not to be involved in either of the two world wars began to make some sense. Once you are the New World you want to put the Old World well out of mind.

The readings we have heard today from Daniel and Mark are about the great gulf that exists between a new world and an old world or a new age and an old age. The words spoken by Jesus are very consciously imitating the words spoken to Daniel by an Angel. So I will begin with Daniel.

Daniel is very often spoken of as being a prophet. That is someone who speaks on behalf of God and reveals the mind of God. But there is a difference between the kind of prophecy contained in Daniel and the kind in, say, Isaiah. By and large the prophecy spoken by Isaiah, Amos and many others is in the form of encouragement or warning to the people of Israel.

Now Isaiah saw God is dealing with sin in a natural way. He warned that if the people of Israel did not mend their ways then he would strengthen

and encourage their neighbour to wage war against them and to destroy them as a nation.

But Daniel sees God as intervening in a supernatural way. He will bring the world to an end, he will triumph over his enemy, Satan, and he will create a new world. And the gulf between the new world and the old world will be as wide and deep as the Atlantic Ocean.

The key aspects of Daniel's view of the world are these:

First that world events are moving towards a conclusion. Life on earth is not cyclic - it does not go round and round in circles.

Ironically this is a view of the world that is probably easier for us to take in than for earlier generations. We now know all about theories of the big bang when the universe began to expand. We know about theories of evolution, showing how creation changes and adapts to its environment; we know about theories of the big crunch, how it will all come to an end some day. And in a world where fearsome nuclear weapons have already been used twice, we know exactly how it is possible for the world to be brought to a complete end.

But the second aspect of Daniel's thought is this. The direction that the world is moving is not random or chance. It is determined by God's plan. Although the world may often be confused by the activity of Satan, God remains in ultimate charge and he will do with the world as he likes.

And the purpose of this vision was to strengthen a people who were being persecuted. During this time, only a century and a half before the birth of Jesus, Jerusalem was occupied by the Greek Empire. Practice of their religion was repressed so severely that you could be executed simply for possessing a copy of the Scriptures. We, in our time, know all about sophisticated methods of torture and even terrorism, but there is nothing new in the human desire to dominate another human being.

Daniel is the most significant book of the Old Testament to see the world in his way. And this view of the world is known as apocalyptic – literally 'revealing'. But apocalyptic visions are repeated twice in the New

Testament. One is in the Book of Revelation, sometimes known as the Book of the Apocalypse. The Book of Revelation is written for the same purpose as Daniel - to encourage persecuted people - although by his time it is Christians being persecuted by the Roman Empire.

But the other place apocalyptic visions occur is in the gospel, where Jesus uses language of this nature. Other than in his passion leading to his death, Jesus suffered no persecution and his disciples were unharmed in his lifetime. But Jesus clearly expects that being his followers will in due course lead to great suffering. And he was right.

This is more than just an interesting piece of history. We in Britain are not subject to persecution in the way that the early Christians or the Jews were. But the Christian view of the world is very steadily being squeezed out. And it is being squeezed out of us. Scarcely without us realizing we are being secularized, we are being moulded; we are being reformed in the shape of humanism. And we must resist.

Now this is a dangerous thing for Christians to think because we can react by simply resisting all change: we can close the door to gay marriage; we can close the door to any sexual relationships other than lifelong marriage; close the door to women priests; close the door to any form of euthanasia or abortion; any form of contraception. It may well be that some of those doors should be closed. But those are not the fundamental tendencies we need to resist. What we need to resist is the belief that humanity is in charge of this world. We are not. It is God's world. And he has lent it to us. And I must resist the tendency to believe that I am in charge of my personal life. I am not. My life is God's life. And the gulf between the Christian way of thinking and the secular way of thinking is as wide and as deep as the Atlantic Ocean.

There are three reasons for claiming that that my life belongs to God. The first is that He made me and made me in love. Psalm 139 puts it like this:

My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth

The prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah on a number of occasions liken human beings to clay pots with God as the potter. That of course is why God is known as our Father and why Jesus likens himself to a mother hen and the people of Jerusalem to chickens. We are made by God with love, to be loved by him and to love him.

The second reason for believing that my life belongs to God is that he died for me. As Jesus died on the cross he cried out 'It is accomplished!'

In more common language, I've done it! For centuries human beings have offered all kinds of sacrifices to try and restore the relationship between themselves and God. This was true of the Jewish faith and the Roman and Greek religions. Christians have only one sacrifice – God himself in the form of Jesus Christ. This is the message of the letter to the Hebrews.

The third reason for believing that I belong to God is that he makes each one of us holy by his own Spirit. When the disciples gathered behind locked doors on the day of the resurrection, Jesus appeared among them. St John records that he said to them,

'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'
When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
'Receive the Holy Spirit. (20v21)

This is the new world; this is the revelation; that the reality of the world is totally unlike that acknowledged by the secular world. That is why we can say, in the words of Psalm 16 read a few minutes ago:

I bless the Lord who gives me counsel;
my heart teaches me night after night.
I have set the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not fail.
my heart therefore is glad, and my spirit rejoices;
my body also shall rest in hope. (vvs 7-8)