**Advent – Christmastide 2020-2021**

**29 November 2020 | 1st Sunday in Advent | Mark 13:33-37 | Stay Awake**

Mark’s Gospel accompanies us through the year. Today we are told bluntly to be on the watch for the Lord’s coming, like a soldier on guard duty. We cannot be caught asleep, unprepared, surprised by his return, for no one knows the exact time. The call is to live and act as if the last judgment was to occur at any moment and to live so that one will be judged positively. It was normal to expect a master’s return during daylight, since travel in the dark was difficult and dangerous. The master of this household could come at any time during the day or night. The duties of the servants/slaves have been pre-assigned; how well they have done these will be the issue on the master’s return. Sleeping servants prepares us for disciples sleeping in the garden. The passage is directed to four disciples, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, but the last directive is addressed to all of Mark’s readers. “Watch!” is a key word in the Gethsemane account.

The disciples of Jesus have just asked Jesus “When will this (the destruction of the Temple) happen?” Jesus’ answer is that only God knows when the end of the world will come. Not knowing, one must always be on the watch. The reading opens the Advent season, the time we watch and prepare to celebrate the first coming of the Lord; yet we are called on to watch and be ready for the return of the Lord, his Second Coming.

**6 December | 2nd Sunday in Advent | Mark 1:1-18 | Make straight the way of the Lord**

The Gospel for Year B is Mark. Its author is unknown to us and its title was added later in the second century. We are not even sure of who it was written for though it seems that they were a persecuted group and the Christians in Rome during the time of Emperor Nero certainly met that criterion. It comes from around the year 70, the year the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Mark is the earliest gospel and was highly respected as an important source for Matthew and Luke. With the Advent theme of new beginnings, Mark is the beginning of the writing of the Gospel.

Key to understanding Mark is that one can never understand Jesus until one recognises him as the suffering Messiah of the Gospel of the Cross. Mark interprets Jesus in light of the Hebrew Bible. Today’s reading is a good example of this. ‘The beginning’ echoes Genesis 1:1 as a new creation takes place in Christ. The messenger who ‘goes ahead’ suggests the angel who went ahead of the Exodus group in its march to freedom; he ‘prepares the way’ for repentance (Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:1). In the opening verses Mark sums up the biblical movement where angels or prophets call people to prepare, through repentance, for God’s coming to us, and the voice is John the Baptist’s, our guide through Advent.

**13 December | 3rd Sunday in Advent | John 1:6-8, 19-28 | John, sent by God**

Again today we meet today the authentic witness to the Word of God, John. He is one ‘sent by God’, the only other human being, apart from Jesus, described in this way. He is an ‘apostle’ (i.e. one sent). John’s three tasks are to give testimony (eis marturian=martyr), to bear witness to the light, and that all might believe through him. The witness he gives is that the light is coming into the world. This witness and the question of Jesus’ identity continue into the first days of Jesus as the Baptist points away from himself to another whom those who have been sent from Jerusalem do not know.

If you read John 1:1-18 you are reading the prologue to John’s gospel. It also echoes Genesis 1:1 ‘In the beginning’ and introduces the great themes of life, light, and darkness. But our two passages on John the Baptist are clearly intrusions that break the flow of the poem and are later intrusions to emphasis John the Baptist as a secondary figure to the ‘coming one’ and a witness to him. We see this come through strongly in the second part of today’s gospel when John is confronted by the authorities from Jerusalem and states that he himself is not the Messiah/Christ – “I am not!” is in contrast to the many “I am!” statements of Jesus, throughout this gospel.

**20 December | 4th Sunday in Advent | Luke 1:26-38 |**

Before the announcement to Mary comes the announcement to Zechariah, the proper sequence as John the Baptist is the precursor of Jesus. Luke also emphasizes Jesus’ connection to David, even though it is through Joseph of the house of David that the descent must be traced. Mary is greeted as Gifted Lady, filled and favoured by God as a graced person. Her child to be is called “Son of the Most High”, a favourite term in Luke for God. The clearest allusion to our first reading is in ‘throne of his ancestor David’, and pointing forward to the future resurrection when Jesus will assume his seat at the right hand, in power, of God. He will rule over Israel (the house of Jacob), and bring in the kingdom without end.

Mary’s question enables the angel to clarify the true origins of the child. God’s power overcomes human incapacity; the overshadowing by the Holy Spirit is a clear reference to the cloud of God’s presence (as at the Exodus or Transfiguration). That nothing is impossible to God was spoken to the barren Sarah re the birth of Isaac; it is spoken again to the virgin, Mary, re the birth of the Son of God. This servant of the Lord speaks her yes to God’s request, thus joining her to the long line of female and male servants of God through history.

**25 December | Nativity of Our Lord | Christmas Vigil Mass - Matthew 1:1-25 |**

This gospel from Matthew opens with what it claims to be, a record of the ancestry of Jesus Christ. It evokes the earliest of all records, that of how creation came to be in Genesis 1, the story of creation. Jesus Christ will be nothing less than the renewal of all creation. The whakapapa of Jesus will show him to be ‘Son of David’, the main title for the Messiah, the longed-for Davidic ruler who would bring freedom for the people. But what kind of Messiah would he prove to be? ‘Son of Abraham’ is a title every Jewish male laid claim to, but so could many other peoples, so openness to non-Jews is hinted at from the beginning.

There are riches to be drawn from the long list of names in the genealogy. It is not completely accurate. Its aim is to fill out the two titles above. Descent from Abraham weaves Jesus’ story into that of his own people and descent from David establishes his credentials as Messiah. The number 14 is emphasised and 14 is David’s number in the Hebrew alphabet (Dalet = 4; vav = 6; Dalet = 4). David’s name and number is emphasised three times through the use of the ruling line of Judah). Of note is the rare occurrence of the names of the four women who stand out for their non-Jewish connections, and the mysterious circumstances in which they give birth to sons within the line of Judah. It is through Mary that the greatest and most mysterious birth takes place.

**Christmas Midnight - Luke 2:1-14 | A Saviour has been born for us**

The tangle of Roman references that begin the text emphasis that the Holy Spirit is at work for both Gentile and Jewish worlds. While Caesar Augustus may have been regarded as the prince of peace, the true Prince of Peace is about to be born. An imperial decree made for tax purposes sends this small family to the home town of the Davidic family to Bethlehem. Mary gives birth to her son outside the town, in a barn, laying him in a manger, a stone feeding trough for animals. This marginal location enables the marginalised shepherds to find the child after an annunciation to them by an angel: “Today is born for you a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.” “Today” will echo five times through Luke and each time it will mark salvation for the lost and lowly.

**Christmas Day - John 1:1-18 | The Word became flesh and dwelt among us**

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us: John 1:1-18. “In the beginning” opened the old order of creation in Genesis. Now this opening note warns us of a new creation as this new action of God begins with the Word made Flesh. Appropriately life, light and darkness, the great original creation terms will echo through the gospel as they pick up rich symbolic meaning. Jesus has the power of life in him and will impart it to others. Light and darkness are in a great cosmic conflict and Jesus will make the claim “I am the light of the world.” He came to his own and his life will be marked by their resistance; yet belief in him will lead to the empowerment to become children of God. The great truth is the Incarnation which in the Greek means “He pitched his tent among us”.

**27 December |The Holy Family | Luke 2:22-40 | The child grew in maturity**

Jesus at twelve years of age is hardly an infancy narrative. Perhaps it is best to consider when else was Jesus lost for three days, sought sorrowing, and doing the work of his Father? The answer is clearly at his Passion and Death. Out of the adult life of Jesus we have a story that foreshadows his future. Obedient to the Law, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to Jerusalem for Passover. As a twelve-year-old, Jesus was expected in his society to grasp and shape his adult identity, and as so often happens, even today, this involves pain for the family. Adolescent impatience with parental concern seems part of the account as anxious parents sought him for three days, only to be challenged that they should have known what he was about. The sword of sorrow that Simeon prophesied begins here with the awareness that Mary would have to give her Son over to what he had to do. Note that Luke, who is Mary’s champion throughout his gospel, does not place her at the foot of the cross. Her sorrow begins here.