

Mark 13: 24-37

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake — for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

My brother and sisters,

I have ventured out at 2 a.m. on a day so dark that it is known as Black Friday.

I have gazed into the coal-black eyes...

of those who waited two hours to enter Kohls back aisles,

only to wait another two hours to purchase what they will soon discard.

I can report that capitalism is alive and well in Findlay, Ohio...

but patience, prudence, and common sense? Not so much.

This Sunday is the 1st Sunday/Advent:

the season in which we intentionally prepare ourselves for Xmas.

The advertisers, catalogues, and malls would have us jump ahead,

focus all of our attention on Xmas Day;

they'd have us skip over the necessary preliminaries...

and miss the point altogether.

They want us to set our sights on gifts rather than on the giver:

our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

If you look at Gospel lessons for the next 4 weeks,

you see that Advent prepares us for Xmas in 3 stages:

1st (this week) we look ahead to the end times, the last days, the final coming of Christ.

2nd we spend 2 Sundays hearing about John the Baptist,
who prepared the way for Christ's 1st coming.

3rd we hear story/angel coming to Mary with the news she'll give birth to the Messiah.

This may seem a bit backwards:

why should we hear of the 2nd Coming of Christ before the first?

As Christians, we look forward to understand the past and give meaning to the present.

The future explains past events and tells us what we need to be doing now.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us our future:

at the end of time, the Son will come in power and glory.

The elect (all the living and the dead for whom Jesus died)...

will be gathered from the ends of the earth and from heaven.

This is wonderful news: news of hope for all who suffer now.

When will this happen? That's even better news, though it's a bit confusing.

Jesus says, *Truly I tell you,*

this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

What generation? The most obvious answer is that Jesus meant his generation:
the people to whom he was speaking.

Or maybe, the next generation: those whom the writer of Mark addressed.

Either way, this didn't happen: these generations died before the 2nd Coming.

Did Jesus blow it?

What other possibilities are there?

Maybe we're not understanding what Jesus is saying,

or maybe Jesus was misquoted,

by the writer of Mark or by someone in the oral tradition.

I find that with questions like this it's best to first assume...

that the Bible means exactly what it says.

I see no contradiction b/t what is written here about the end...

and what is written elsewhere.

Over and over we are told that no one, not even the Son,

knows when the end will come, but that we can expect it any moment now.

Jesus enhances that expectation in his audience...

by saying that it will come during the lifetime/the current generation.

So, was he being dramatic...

or did he really believe that he'd return before his listeners died?

The message is the same either way ("Be prepared."),

so you don't need to resolve this question...

in order to understand the passage.

If the notion of Jesus making a mistake disturbs you, let me offer you this.

Jesus was fully human, as well as fully divine.

He was not, like Hercules of Greek mythology, half human/half divine.

We are told that to become fully human,

the Son/God emptied himself of his divinity.

The Son didn't see equality w/ the Father as something to be exploited...
but gave it up in order to experience life as we experience it.

I'm not going to pretend I know how this worked,
but it seems to me that Jesus could not have been...

omnipotent (all-powerful),

omnipresent (present everywhere),

or omniscient (all-knowing) and still experience life as we do.

If he were all-powerful, he wouldn't have suffered pain/death on the cross;
if present everywhere, he wouldn't have felt abandoned...

(on the cross, he asked his Father, *Why have you forsaken me?*);

if all-knowing, he wouldn't have experienced doubt or fear.

What we behold on the cross...

is a human being facing pain, death, loneliness, doubt, and fear perfectly.

He is divine in his ability to overcome the human frailty within himself.

So, I suppose Jesus could have made a mistake in the timing of the 2nd Coming.

If such a thing is possible, it only serves to underscore the miracle Jesus was,
how deep his faith ran.

If you think about it, faith can only exist within human limitation.

Faith is reliance: if Jesus was all-powerful,

he had no need to rely on the Father for anything.

Faith is perseverance:

if Jesus was present everywhere, he had no need to stay on the cross.

Faith is trust: if Jesus knew everything from the beginning of time to the end,

he had no need to trust that what the Father was telling him was true.

If Jesus really didn't know when the end would come,

his faith that it would indeed come in the way he was told is remarkable.

He was willing to give up his life for this belief.

He died virtually unnoticed: rebuked by society and abandoned by his friends.

Yet, despite all the evidence that his sacrifices were coming to nothing,

he remained obedient.

His unconditional love for us and unflappable faith sustained him.

We can take heart that someone with our limitations...

was able to overcome them by faith alone.

A god who comes to earth in all his glory is no model for lowly humans;

a God who surrenders divinity to show us how to live is worthy of imitation.

And now we have accomplished something of what we set out to do during Advent:

we've begun to prepare ourselves for coming of the Savior...

by focusing, not on spectacle of Xmas day, but on the One who came that day...

and will come again at some unspecified time in the future.

The business of Advent is not ornaments/parades/shepherds/stars/Wise Men/gifts.

These are wonderful, and their time is coming.

But we are not ready for them until we have examined who all the fuss is about.

I've told you before about the Xmas when my brother Tim and I were told...

that we could come down and open presents as soon as we woke up.

At 1 a.m., when my parents returned from sipping eggnog at our neighbors' house,
they found the two of us in the middle of the living room floor...

surrounded by all of our unwrapped presents!

We should be as excited for Xmas as my brother and I were,

but we also need to wait until all is prepared.

In the next 2 weeks, John/Baptist will take us another step in our preparations.

I can't wait!