

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's useful to remind ourselves that **Advent** is a time of expectant waiting and preparation for *both* the celebration of the **Nativity of Christ** at **Christmas** and the return of Christ at the **Second Coming** because for many of us the promise of Advent has much more to do with Christmas than it does with the return of Christ at the end of time. This was not true in the early church when the *Parousia* was expected at any moment... until it became clear that it had been delayed; and ultimately, many lost hope that it would ever arrive. There have, of course, been many times in western history when radical Christians have imagined that Christ will return on a particular day --- say, January 1 of the year 500 or 1,000 or even 2,000 --- only to be bitterly disappointed at its failure to materialize.

And I think it is in view of that long history of delusional moments marked by extreme disappointment that we have lost interest and focus when it comes to the Second Coming, particularly in our post-Enlightenment world of the triumph of reason over traditional belief. So, today's reading brings us up short. It is resplendent in its description of the moment when we shall see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" *with great power and glory*. But that picture is not complete without mentioning the fact that 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." We are told that when we see these things happen, we will know that "he is near, at the very gates."

These texts seem very strange to us. And they remind us of the moment when Albert Schweitzer was studying organ in Paris when his teacher, the famous organ composer Charles Marie Widor, confessed that he did not understand Bach's chorale preludes. Schweitzer is said to have informed Widor that it was understandable that he would not comprehend them in that he was unfamiliar with the Lutheran hymns upon which they were based, hymns permeated with the fantastic imagery of the New Testament evocation of the Second Coming of Christ. And that's also our problem. For example, if we forget how this chapter begins, that is, with questions about the fall of the Temple, our inability to comprehend the language of this passage is made manifest because it has everything to do with a particular historic event --- the defeat of Israel in the War with Rome in 70 A.D. and its resulting chaos (the destruction of both the Temple and the city of Jerusalem).

Jesus warns his listeners that even when these dreadful events occur, "the end is not yet." The siege of Jerusalem will be a sign of the "desolating abomination," in the words of the Book of Daniel, whose presence "signifies imminent destruction." And that language takes us back to an even earlier world, that of the writers of Daniel describing "pagan armies invading Jerusalem, stopping the regular sacrifices in the Temple, and setting up instead 'a desolating abomination.'" The Book of Daniel is a 2nd century B.C.E. biblical apocalyptic work involving both events at that time along with those of the much

earlier Babylonian Captivity. The visions in Daniel reflect the crisis which took place in Judea in 167–164 BCE when [Antiochus IV Epiphanes](#), the Greek king of the [Seleucid Empire](#) (an offshoot of the empire of Alexander the Great), threatened to destroy traditional Jewish worship in Jerusalem. Antiochus plundered the Temple and imposed complete Hellenization (forcing Greek culture upon Judea), prohibiting the Jewish Book of the Law. All of this produced a violent rebellion by patriotic Jews to protect their heritage. That resistance to Hellenization resulted in much violence and mayhem and is described in the Book of Daniel. Without this background, it is difficult to understand the passage we have taken up this morning.

This is because in the minds of the listeners to this gospel account, the events described in Daniel were still vivid, still real, still horrifying because they were part of the culture permeating the life of every Jew, whereas for us they are unknown phenomena we have only glimpsed very partially in a book that is more than 2,000 years old. It is thus no wonder that these images are nearly impossible to decode without significant research. But the few comments I have just made about the context should serve to at least point to our difficulty with these images, our inability to really understand them in the way they would have been received by a first century Jewish audience. Jesus is here using prophetic language originally associated with the captivity of Israel in Babylon many centuries earlier than his own lifetime. If it is not a description of the *actual* end of the world, it is at least the end of *the world for those who* listened to this passage. This was a very vivid description of a way of life that had failed through a combination of injustice toward those living in Judea by its own ruling classes as well as revolutionary violence directed at those outside of that world by Jewish rebels.

Almost every word in verses 24-27 comes directly from the OT prophets. And Jesus is suggesting that the lights are going out in the centers of existing power while the way is prepared for a new world order. The concept of a change in government is symbolized by the destruction of the “discredited building in Jerusalem” and all that it represented because the Son of Man is replacing it. The passage is not about the end of the universe as some have seen it. Rather, it concerns drastic events on the world scene. The language used by Jesus to convey this is not startling because he is using the same words as those of the prophets. Rather, it is shocking because he uses it with regard to “*the fate of Jerusalem and its temple.*” Usually, this kind of language had been used by the prophets to suggest that the target was a Gentile nation posing a threat to God’s people. But here the target is Jerusalem itself. There is “savage irony” in the fact that the words of Isaiah are used here not to denounce Babylon but to pronounce the downfall of the temple itself, the very center of Jewish faith.

The term *Son of Man* in Daniel referred to the “*saints of the Most High.*” But Jesus uses it to say that he himself is to receive this ultimate authority. It is a startling statement of the idea that Jesus himself, along with his church, that international body of people who acknowledge his sovereignty, is now *to be*

understood as the true Israel. For earthly evidence that the Son of Man is on his throne, one had only to consider the destruction of the Temple. Later, the phenomenal growth of the early church would provide additional evidence.

Some scholars believe the Gospel of Mark was written for followers of Jesus who were trying to cope with life during the War with Rome. They see this in the apocalyptic prophecies in chapter 13 of his gospel. Here Jesus' own words about the destruction of the Temple are being fulfilled, but his followers are cautioned not to "be taken up in the political and apocalyptic fervor of the revolt" itself. The end of the Temple does not signal the end of the world. That remains for "an indefinite future." What his gospel says about Jesus' disciples in the future puts much emphasis upon suffering. Prophecy here warns of persecution. His followers can expect to be dragged before Jewish and non-Jewish authorities because of their testimony to the gospel. Family members will turn against one another, but his followers are to remain confident that the Spirit will be present with them. With such consistent emphasis on suffering for the gospel, "the stories on suffering for (its message), the stories of how fearful Jesus' disciples were -- these show that the Evangelist does not ignore the human difficulties involved" in remaining faithful to the Lord. And this is equally part of the message about what discipleship entails.

In the words of St. Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians, *I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. AMEN*

Sources

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