

Sunday 11/15/09 Pentecost 24 St Mary's Castleton Staten Island

Being watchful

Can you imagine if, as a young person, someone would hand to you a book containing future mysteries like this: the person you would marry; what job you would do; and everything else about your life ahead? Wouldn't that be amazing? For adults, wouldn't it be good to know exactly what are the future mysteries of the stock market – what it will do, next week, next month, or next year?

Our gospel reading today (Mk 13:14-23) and the other readings we have reveal the mysteries or secrets of the future, which is just what we mean when we call this “apocalyptic” writing. Such futuristic or “apocalyptic” writing tends to emerge during times of social stress, uncertainty, persecution, or when people feel at a loss as to who they are, or what they should do (a sense of 'anomie'). In our own time, there are also books which project into the future.

Even today we also know social stress, as those ancient apocalyptic writers knew in their time. In our time, we have seen 9/11 – the court trials for this are about to begin. There have been and continue to be wars in many places. We are living through the worst recession, and worst unemployment, since the 1930's. There is rape, abuse, and violence both in our streets and in our homes. Climate change is an increasing problem if not a crisis. When sufficiently 'annoyed', Mother Nature could easily inflict all the disasters reflected in our readings today. So, as those old 'apocalyptic' writers experienced, so we too experience social stress in our time.

The approach of the end of the calendar year accentuates the anxiety in this drama. This period brings various changes, which mix together good and bad, highs, and lows. Examples include these: Exam time approaches. For some, this might be the end of their employment. For some, perhaps a new job; and for others, retirement. Many people have no money at all. The TV advertisements for Christmas are almost cruel to them.

The coming season of Advent reflects the 'warning', the negative, or low element, while the sense of hope, love, and generosity during the ensuing season of Christmas reflects the positive, good, or bright elements in the highly colored drama of this time of year.

We sometimes feel very small in a big and hostile world. We wonder whether what place there will be for our children or grandchildren in this changing world. The Virgin Mary must have wondered the same thing about her son Jesus.

The desolating sacrilege (person) where *he* ought not to be: Nowhere else in the Gospel of Mark did Jesus give such warnings or such instructions as he gave here in today's reading about an advanced or a remote future. This passage warns of a person setting himself up as God (in the Temple sanctuary at Jerusalem). This did not actually happen in the first century. So, if this is indeed a true prophecy of Jesus, then perhaps it may still be in the future. And yet, all too often, we ourselves experience leaders who seem to consider themselves to be divine, who think they are above the rest of us, wouldn't you say?

Flee: At different points in the Bible, we read in some places in the scriptures that there are some things we should resist, on the one hand. Then again, on the other hand, in other places in the scriptures, we read that there are some things from which we should flee. When faced by a crisis, what should one do? Resist, or flee? In personal life, and in history people have sometimes quite rightly fled, and times they have quite rightly resisted:

- At Dunkirk – the British forces withdrew, or fled from the German forces; and had to do so. But on D-Day – the Allied forces advanced; and had to do so.
- On 9/11 – some fled the burning Twin Towers, as they should have; while some (firefighters) approached, as they should have.
- At the personal level. There are, for example, office romances. Should one resist such a thing, or should one flee from that appointment, and seek a new assignment?
- In our trials and temptations: What does the Holy Spirit say to us? Should we resist, or should we flee?

When should one flee, and when resist? Following the gospel reading, what is the real Lord telling us to do?

Being watchful: The answer to this lies in the Markan theme of “watchfulness”, which we see at the end of our reading, in the words, “take heed”.

We know we must watch out, in life. Parents must be watchful over children, especially young children, or teens, because anything could happen. Sick people need to be watched over, because anything could happen. Police watch over society, because anything could happen. The Environmental Protection Agency urges us on in our duty to watch over our environment. We know we have to be watch over things of value, for example, buildings, livestock, or financial investments. We have to be

watchful over money, energy, and garbage; over various health issues, like diet, exercise, and rest.

What good are successful investments if, meanwhile, any one thing of our environment, other people, or our inner and personal life, any one of them, has been wrecked?

Jesus in the Gospel of Mark repeatedly urges us to be watchful over our spiritual life. That speaks of a daily spiritual discipline. This opens us to the strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit, who cares for the universe and every single part of it. This can be for example through a practice of (shared) prayer and reading of the scriptures (as the Collect emphasizes); or through spiritual fellowship, or through talking with a spiritual director or with a trusted mentor or friend.

Anything could happen at any moment to test us. A (shared) daily spiritual discipline of prayer and reading the scriptures day by day, night by night, gives us counsel (in the Psalm) for everything. Pray constantly, and often, with others. Above all other things, watch over your spirit; and then, trust what the Holy Spirit tells you to do.

Amen.