

First Sunday of Advent

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Introduction

An overall introduction to the reflections for Advent 2020

One of our general principles in producing the weekly reflections for the Spirituality of Conflict project has been to avoid tying these too tightly to events current at the time of writing. Earlier this year however the [introduction to our Holy Week reflections](#) noted that in the light of the Covid19 pandemic, it seemed wrong to write as though everything was simply 'business as usual'. That seems to be even more true of this Advent as we face renewed waves of infection with further lockdowns and restrictions, huge political upheavals around the world, and multiple uncertainties about what the next weeks and months will bring for us all. Never has the question "what is left of the night?" – asked of the watchman in Isaiah 21 – seemed more pressing; never has the ambiguous reply of "Morning is coming, but also the night" seemed more resonant.

Advent, the season of waiting, is also a time of watching – of looking and attending – and the Advent readings for Year B all tell us something about aspects of this very human activity. The questions they point us toward and which weave back and forth through the texts – How do we look? Where are we looking? What or who are we looking at? Why are we looking? What do we do with our seeing? – are all pertinent ones for this time when so much is going on, as well as for us to consider in the context of developing a spirituality of conflict. Looking for God and the signs of their Kingdom is an essential element of any Incarnational spirituality and praxis.

Thus whilst not referring directly to the pandemic or other current events, these Advent and Christmas reflections are nevertheless influenced by them. Our hope is that, alongside their usual role of helping us to explore conflict generally, they might also support reflection on the particular conflicts which the events of 2020 have exposed or heightened, as well as on our own responses and what we might need to amend, celebrate, or strengthen in these. This too seems a very appropriate way of keeping Advent – of watching, waiting, and encountering God's light in unexpected places, and in ways which are sometimes comforting and sometimes challenging but always illuminating.

Advent 1: How are we looking?

For year B of the lectionary cycle, Mark takes over from Matthew as our principle companion and guide. However, the journey commences not at the beginning of his

Gospel (that comes next week) but with the so-called 'little apocalypse' which sits at the heart of his passion narrative. At first sight this might seem a strange starting point but in fact this passage, with its repeated emphasis on the nature and quality of our looking, is a perfect place to set out for a journey through a gospel in which seeing is a central theme. Given that our passage today is inextricably linked via its first line to the preceding verses, it makes sense to also attend to the opening of the chapter as we consider this key theme.

Preparation: Read the whole of Mark 13 and make a list of any words or phrases that you feel have a connection with looking, paying attention, or seeing. The text given here is from the NRSV but you might find it useful to look at other translations as well using a resource like [biblehub](#) (which allows direct verse by verse comparisons) or [Bible Gateway](#) (where you can read the complete passage in assorted different translations). Make a note of the 'feel' of each word/phrase and write your own definition for it.

Text

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.”

Comment

We have noted before some of the complexities around material from the apocalyptic genre; and the issues and difficulties we face when reading it divorced from its historical and cultural contexts, especially when various parts can seem to speak so directly to our own current circumstances. Today's passage, with its strong echoes of assorted Jewish apocalyptic traditions, and its apparent connection to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, is no exception. However if we take a step back from these distractions, the text also has some key things to say about the importance of how we look – how we attend to what is going on around us. 'Seeing' is an important Markan *leitmotif* – key moments in his narrative are bookended by, or hinge upon, stories and incidents connected with blindness, partial or distorted seeing, and seeing properly. This is not just about physical seeing, it is about **understanding** what we see – and **how we look**, the manner of our looking, is a key part of this. Today's Gospel passage, and the preceding verses which set it up, reference seeing on fifteen occasions, outlining different types and qualities of looking as they do so.

Firstly there is something which we might perhaps designate as '**distracted looking**'. Indeed it is an example of this which sets the whole chapter in motion and leads to the words of Jesus which we are considering here. Jesus and his disciples have been in the Temple where he has been giving answers – sometimes difficult and puzzling answers – to questions about himself, taxes, resurrection, money, and love. We can imagine the ensuing buzz, but then as they leave the building the disciples have something of a squirrel moment: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Jesus uses exactly the same disjunctive participle (*ide* – 'behold!')* in v21 to describe something that will happen in the times about which he is warning them: 'Look! ...the Messiah!' 'Look – there he is!' There are things – they might even be or appear to be good things – which can cause us to take our eye off the ball, to draw our attention away from what matters. Various mechanics could lie at the root of this distraction – perhaps we struggle to cope with the implications, complications, complexity or enormity of what we are seeing; perhaps someone else wants (for good or bad reasons) to deflect us from looking at and thinking about something – a technique which might seem disconcertingly familiar at present. Whatever the reason, the net result is that we stop attending and thus we may fail to see, to understand, something that is important.

Then there is what we might call '**deep looking**'. Mark uses two different verbs for seeing – *hora* and *blep* – at different points in the passage. While both are connected with bodily vision, the latter 'indicates a greater vividness ... expressing a more intent earnest contemplation...it especially stresses the thought of the person who sees' * In verses 14 and 26 ("when you see.."; "Then they will see..") which use *hora*, it seems that Jesus is simply describing what people will see at these apocalyptic moments. The verb mood indicates that these are statements of facts – indications of what could or might happen. Contrast this with the feel of verses 5, 9, 23, and 33 where Mark uses *blep* and moreover always uses it in the imperative

(command) form: “beware/see to it”; “beware/be on your guard”; “be alert/take heed”; “beware/take heed”. The urgency is clear and although sometimes the English slightly obscures it, Jesus is telling his disciples that they need to look – not just to observe or note superficially but to *really* look, to get beyond the immediate surface appearance of things. This kind of looking takes time and effort; it needs us to have some awareness of the conditioned nature of our looking – of the different narratives, prejudices and experiences which influence our seeing – and of how these might shape and possibly distort it.

The closing section adds a final two verbs which the NRSV renders “Keep alert” (v33), ‘be on the watch’ (v34) and “keep awake” (v35 and v37) but which the RSV uniformly translates with the more old fashioned “Watch’ – a word strongly associated with Advent. We may no longer talk about ‘the watches of the night’ but we have probably experienced what is to keep watch or vigil in some way, and of the particular sort of attentiveness this involves. In fact ‘watch’ gives a better idea of what is going on here since the greek words convey much more than simply battling sleepiness. In v33 *agrypne* expresses ‘not mere wakefulness, but the “watchfulness” of those who are intent upon a thing’* i.e it carries a sense of a concentrated attention – perhaps like the watchmen on the city walls intently examining the sky for the first signs of dawn, or constantly scanning the horizon for signs of disturbance or danger. Similarly the etymological roots of *gr gore* (vv34, 35 and 36)*, move it away from being merely the opposite of being asleep to a much more active sense of collecting one’s faculties – gathering up scattered thoughts or unconscious attentions and knitting these together into a unified purposeful attentiveness: the watchmen don’t just scan – they evaluate the information their senses give them, and use it to inform their judgments and actions. Jesus seems to be pointing here towards something which we could usefully think of as ‘**collected looking**’. This, like the work of the watchmen, involves a more wide ranging active type of attention, one which takes an overview of different elements and pulls them together into fuller, more textured assessments and understandings.

This passage thus leaves us with a variety of angles from which to interrogate the nature and quality of our own looking in different situations, both conflict related and more generally, as we journey through Advent. Some possible questions are suggested in the response section below but you may well have others or different ways of framing them which are more helpful for you. The aim here is, as always, not to provide rods with which we can punish ourselves, but to help us examine and improve our practice. Looking properly, seeing clearly, understanding deeply, are difficult skills which take a lifetime to acquire and hone – as the Gospel stories, particularly those relating to the disciples, make abundantly clear.

Response

You might like to consider one or more of the following questions (or others which the passage has raised for you) – perhaps with reference to a specific conflict situation, perhaps with respect to things which are currently happening in public life, or perhaps more generally as a way of reflecting on your ongoing journey into God.

– Are there areas where I am struggling to be attentive in my looking, or where I am allowing others (for good or bad reasons) to distract me from it? What might be going on? Does it matter? Do I need to try and find a remedy? Is there someone who could help me with this?

– Am I looking/willing to look beyond the immediate surface of things when necessary? Am I sufficiently aware of the things which might be conditioning my seeing? Does it matter? Is it something I ought to/can do something about? Is there someone who could help me with this?

– Am I looking for different sorts of information, or bringing together different elements when I try to understand complex situations, make evaluative judgements or decide on appropriate actions? Are there ways in which I could develop/deepen these skills? Is there someone who could help me with this?

Prayer

Jesus
Even you needed
to sometimes look
more than once
or with deeper attention
in order to properly see and understand
what was happening around you.

In this season of watching
may we too
be steady
brave
and diligent
in the work of looking

that through seeing more clearly
and understanding more richly
we may recognise and nurture
the signs of your Kingdom
and resist all that opposes
its flourishing life
or undermines
its generous love
Amen

Further Reading

* See Vine's and Strong's Expository dictionaries for information on definitions and parsing etc.