

Vigilance and grace

David Fotheringham, 29 November 2020

First Sunday of Advent (just before I take leave to be married)

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

Bible reading: Mark 13: 24-37;
1 Corinthians 1:4-7

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

O God, beginning and end, by whose command time runs its course: bless our impatience, perfect our faith, and, while we await the fulfillment of your promises, grant us hope in your Word. Amen.

Here at the beginning of Advent we are assailed with the apocalyptic imagery of Mark chapter 13. Over the next year, most of our gospel readings will be from Mark, and it's a bit odd to begin with chapter 13, but it's supposed to help to set the scene for our waiting for the arrival of Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas.

In its Biblical context, it's about Jesus preparing his disciples for the long wait after his own death and resurrection before the consummation of all things, the final judgement, not the end of the world but it's being made new.

Jesus teaches that all kinds of earth-shaking things can and will happen - even the immensely massive temple that dominated Jerusalem would be destroyed; but these would not be an end in themselves. All sorts of things might pass away; but Jesus' words and assurance will not. In the time between Jesus' ascension and the full realisation of God's kingdom, God will be with us even through the darkest valleys. Our task is to be wise and vigilant, always watching for the work and presence of God in our midst.

At this end of 2020, I'm not sure how much more apocalyptic language we can stand! Perhaps you can see why these sorts of assurances and Biblical passages are entirely relevant: temples fall, and worldwide apocalyptic things happen. And we keep looking and praying and staying vigilant, watching and looking for God's peace and justice to prevail.

And so, in our other Bible reading, we find Paul addressing the Corinthian church as they "wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ". In so many ways, this is a rather nice sentiment for the first Sunday of Advent, as we take the stance of waiting for the celebration of Christmas, the revealing of Jesus Christ as a child, born in humble circumstances in a small corner of Palestine. In fact, though, as Paul writes, Jesus had already been revealed as the One born in humble flesh; the One who loved with steadfast love, teaching the reconciling love of God, rejected and crucified, but shown with power to be the Son of God in his resurrection on the third day. He writes to people who are working

out their faith and discipleship on the basis of the faith they have seen in Jesus; and the love for God and neighbour that he proclaimed.

I'm attracted to this reading this morning because it reflects something that I want to reflect back to you, as a people of faith gathered around High Street Uniting. It's something that I want to reflect given the way that we have been navigating this time, which has been very much an "in between" time, between knowing what it's been like worshipping together face to face, and awaiting a future time when that will again be one of the elements of our worship.

Into this kind of circumstance, Paul writes: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus." "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus." Several elements stand out from that immediately.

The first is always giving thanks to God for you. I know that personally I am always thankful for the warmth and grace of this congregation, from my very first experience of your welcome, your practicality, your acceptance. Paul writes in other places that we should give thanks at all times. Given that later in this letter Paul has to deal with some problems in the Corinthians community - some divisions – some commentators think that he is just talking them up, here. But I think it's likely to be very real. Paul is in the business of recognising God's gifts in all sorts of places, and giving thanks for God's presence even in some dark valleys that he had to traverse, and I think his recognition for causes of thanks was always genuine.

He says that he is thankful for the "grace of God" that he sees, which is the second element that stands out to me. Sometimes, people reduce "grace" to simply mean undeserved forgiveness – suggesting that God's grace just means that God is prepared to overlook our sins. But grace is much more than that. In our own context, I see so much grace in the ways that so many people have been prepared to have a go at worshipping online or on phones, to suspend natural resistance and try it; and having tried it to continue to work with it in good grace. And, indeed, even in dealing with the extended frustrations of the long lockdown, I see so much grace in that way that people have been thankful for the things that we have been able to do by phone, over zoom, and by whatever means.

But before everyone gets too prideful about all of this – it's a fair trap – let's recognise, as Paul does, that this is grace that has been given to you in Christ Jesus. This is the third thing that stands out for me. Part of the result of practicing to learn Jesus' way, of practicing the disciplines of times of prayer, of reading and reflection, of fellowship, of worship, is that the fruit of the Spirit grow in us, including patience, peace and grace. These are gifts of God as we engage with God.

And so, as Paul goes on to say, we have every spiritual gift that we need as we are on this journey of waiting and anticipation; and the story of Jesus' work in us continues to be strengthened within us. It is worth stopping to notice this.

Pauls' passage is directed to people who are conscious of being in a time of waiting for the fullness of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God to be revealed. He reminds them that they are already rich in the knowledge of what God's love and grace are all about.

Back in Mark's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that in apocalyptic times they need to keep looking and praying and staying vigilant, watching and looking for God's peace and justice to prevail: noticing what's happening in the environment as they would notice the changing branches on the fig tree, and respond to tend and care for that tree for the sake of the fruit it may bear.

Conscious of the grace we have received and are blessed to share, we are called to remain vigilant as to what is happening in the environment and in society, to tend and care as we look for God's peace and justice to prevail. Thankful that we lack no spiritual gift to do this, be encouraged, vigilant, and gracious in care, in the name of the One on whom we wait.

Amen.

