



December 3rd

THE NEW SHOFAR

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ~ Romans 8:28

Living faithfully before God always comes at a cost

Our quest for insights into today's Gospel begins in the year 170 BC with the King of Syria whose name was Antiochus IV Epiphanes. He was probably the worst persecutor of the Jewish people of any period in their troubled history. He set out to bring all of the nations he conquered under the one set of religious beliefs and practices: his own. He anointed himself *Epiphanes* – God made manifest, and Zeus incarnate. While this was acceptable to the pagan nations, it was unacceptable for the Jews who rebelled against him.

In responding he routinely massacred many innocent Jews, outlawed traditional Jewish practices (circumcisions), burned the sacred texts and unleashed a reign of terror against anyone who broke those rules. The highpoint of his evil was profaning the Temple by erecting idols and the sacrificing of pigs on the altar. This is why he is referred to the “Little Horn” in Daniel's vision, the archetype of the Antichrist of Christian literature.

Why does God allow the righteous believers to suffer so much?

There has been a long tradition in Judaism and Christianity to ponder why it is that God can be so just and righteous and yet sit back and allow evil, even the most hideous and revolting evil to be poured out to those who kneel before Him and strive to follow His commandments? Why does God not vindicate His faithful in the face of the forces of evil and hatred that are aligned against them?

These are the very questions biblical texts like those found in Mark 13 set out to answer, though the answers only make sense to men and women of faith. That chapter is an example of the apocalyptic writings that are found in both Old and New Testaments. What they do is offer a glimpse of a universe that is caught up in the web of a cosmic evil that is represented by demons, beasts, *principalities and powers* (Ephesians 6:11-12). All that God had created as being good now stands corrupted by this evil and the only hope humankind has is in the person of a *strong man* (Mark 1:7) and in Mark's Gospel that Strong Man is seen in the Son of Man (Jesus Christ).

A hole is ripped in the tent of heaven

In that Gospel, this beginning of the end of evil is apparent at the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9-11). In that scene we read of how the heavens are torn open, an apocalyptic image that proclaims that all barriers between God and his creatures have been removed. That verb “torn open” is a very strong word in the Greek suggesting a ragged gash that is beyond all repairs. It highlights the reality of the coming of Jesus. God has entered into this broken world to bring about the fulfilment of the promises he made long ago, guarantees offered to Abraham and to the People of Israel after him. Now is the time of God's Reign.

The other image is that of the dove descending and hovering above the head of Jesus. That is no ordinary dove. It is the dove hovering over the darkness and the deep at the time of Creation. There the bird was anticipating the divine intervention and here, at the river

Jordan it is a sign that in this man Jesus of Nazareth the “strong man” had arrived. The remainder of the Gospel is an account of that struggle and the ultimate victory of God.

What is the point Mark is making?

The message for us, on this first Sunday of Advent is that here in our daily living; in the midst of God’s good creation, the saving graces of God are at work, even if we are not always aware of them. It does not take much of a look around the world today to see signs of the handiwork of those forces opposed to God, the consequences of those men and women who have allowed themselves to be collaborators in evil. Great though they may be, Mark reassures us that we have One who is even greater.

God rips open the heavens and places his stamp of approval on His Son in such a way that Jesus and we readers are privy to this transcendent perspective on history. We now know, how it is that even in the midst of life’s most hellish conditions, that God through Jesus is committed to the fight for us against cosmic evil. In Jesus we have witnessed the ripping open of the heavens and the breaching of the boundaries that gave cosmic evil the upper hand. Nothing now stands between us and God... **Romans 8:35-39**... *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Mark 13 and apocalyptic

Mark is addressing this Good News to all Christians, especially to those who are struggling, those who can expect to undergo hardships of some kind on account of their faith. It is meant for men and women of faith for whom life has thrown up a curve ball, some kind of doubt, sorrow, pain, fear or rejection, anything or person that seems to be working away to break us down or throw us off our life in Christ. What Mark confirms is that as we persevere in faithfulness through these realities, our struggles are absorbed into the unfolding of God’s long-term plan. The victory of Christ over death is a victory in which we can share.

We know peace in the midst of these things because we know the ending to our story. The climax will be the revelation of the glorious Son of Man and the vindication of the elect. The victory of God over all things and an eternal reign. It is about the need to remain faithful and this becomes possible because of the omnipotence and justice of God.

To bring this down from the cosmic level to our daily living: We experience this every time we find ourselves unable to find a way forward in bringing people together, finding and giving forgiveness, overcoming suspicions, jealousy; when gossip replaces truth, judgment is preferred over mercy and when people’s all too human weaknesses come between us and a fellow brother or sister in Christ. In such moments it is as if we feel we were in the grip of something that is bigger and more powerful than our capacity to reason and act as free persons. We can find ourselves trapped if we wander too far from the Living Christ.

These are the times when today’s gospel proclaims its message of hope and highlights a way forward, the only way forward guaranteed to bring life and healing. Tapping into this victory of the Strong Man comes about through our return to faithfulness, a faithfulness that sets us on that pathway of imitating Christ, living and walking as he lived and walked.