

Mark 13 (vv24-37)
[Isaiah 64: 1-9]

Wesley Uniting Church 9/10:30
Advent 1, 30/11/08

The Most Important Thing

Yesterday morning when I unwrapped the *Canberra Times* to find the “Forum” section, this is the bold-print headline that hit me between the eyes: **The end of the world as we know it.** And I thought... Yes, that’s the summary of today’s Bible readings--and a good commentary on how this week has been for me personally as well, not to mention how a lot of people are feeling in the midst of global economic and political crises. The end of the world as we know it.

Philip Dorling’s “Forum” article goes on to be an in-depth look at the declining power of the U.S. and the rising global influence of China--and makes for either comforting or terrifying reading, depending on how you feel about those two great nations. But, don’t worry, I’m not going to indulge in my passionate interest in contemporary politics right now--but rather just use that as a context for the exploration of the most troubling and difficult aspect of Advent theology.

Advent, with its basic liturgical foundation of a time of reflection and preparation for the celebration of Christmas, carries within it three themes of the “Coming of Christ.” The first (and by far the easiest to understand) is the annual celebration of Jesus’ birth--the natural, human and historical ‘coming of Christ’ into the world in a specific time and place. The second theme is the more complex psychological and spiritual ‘coming of Christ’ into our hearts and minds--the indescribably wonderful transformation of human lives that is real and possible when we experience Christ as born within us. But the third and most difficult theme (and for reasons I’ve never quite understood the season of Advent always begins with biblical references to this one)--the third theme is outside of both history and our lived experience: the ‘coming of Christ’ at the end of the world. Just my luck that this is the one I have to preach about!

So, just to lead into this, I’m going to ask you now to just think about this question for a moment: What is important to you? What’s really important?

Each of us has several things in our lives that we regard as important. We

may not always think to call them that, but the time and attention we give to them establishes their actual importance to us. And often we are not even aware of exactly how important something has become until we are deprived of it. Of course, one person's list of 'important things' does not necessarily match anyone else's, and sometimes what is important to one is of no consequence whatsoever to another--which can lead to a lot of unfortunate and unhelpful misunderstandings, criticism and harsh judgement.

But, at the risk of sounding like one of those alarmist 'repent or die' preachers, I have to tell you that there is one thing that's pretty important to each and all of us: the world is going to end! During the past several weeks, as we came to the end of Liturgical Year A in the church's calendar of seasons, we have heard about Matthew's version of the 'end of world' teachings of Jesus. Today we begin Year B with Mark's version. In fact the whole of the 13th chapter of Mark is dedicated to this scary reality of the end of the world--we only heard a few verses today of what is sometimes called "The Little Apocalypse" of Mark's gospel.

We usually want to evade the thought, and we can do that. We can claim that these apocalyptic words might not have actually been said by Jesus--that's a primary way that many scholars manage an escape from the toughness of the Gospel. But I think I should tell you that it's more likely that Jesus did actually say these things, as his testimony on this subject is recorded with only slight alterations in three of the gospels. Well, then, we could at least claim that Jesus is only using this idea of the end of the world as a metaphor of God's power and victory--and, look, I'm no great literary expert here so maybe that's right. Or we might just say we don't need to think about 'the end' yet because it isn't likely to happen in our lifetime...or we can just plead that it's all far too frightening for a Sunday morning...or even be bold enough to say that we just don't believe it. But, no matter what we do, it's very hard to ignore it for long.

I wonder if anyone here noticed that a huge change in liturgical language took place not much more than 10-15 years ago. I don't mean the use of gender inclusive language (which is also important) but the removal of some words that had previously been common to the ending of many prayers: the words "*world without end. Amen.*" Suddenly books started to be printed without much reference to these words, and I've often wondered whose decision that was, but have to admit that these words were an inappropriate doxological comfort that was not actually in keeping with the

witness of scripture. Clearly someone somewhere in the 'land of liturgy' got the idea that it was time to face the truth: **the world will end.**

Some Christians, of course, do not evade this truth at all. In fact, they put so much emphasis on it that they profess to see signs of its imminence all around us. There are just enough tantalising hints in our scriptures so some people have no problem predicting what Jesus himself declared absolutely *unpredictable*: the exact day and hour of The End. Trials, wars, violence, the shaking of the world order? Pretty much like the daily news, so maybe The End is near! But then people of every generation have been able to compile similar lists and attempt similar predictions. Certainly the people of Jesus' own time and place had a similar experience, for they had seen an endless progression of war, distress and oppression. But was this the end of the world?

Jesus wisely only counsels the need of constant vigilance, just in case The End is coming sooner than we might think. What really matters is just that some day the world will end, and so we don't actually have all the time in the world to figure what's important to us. It could have been back then but it wasn't; it could have been yesterday but it wasn't; it could still be today...or perhaps tomorrow. But the central question is: will we be ready?

A world with an end means that life does not go on forever, constantly giving us more chances to make it right. Life has a beginning, a middle and an end. It has a goal, a purpose, a conclusion: in other words, it makes sense to live it right when we live it ready to meet God at any moment.

Our lives are stories we write by living them, good books if we live them well. Our lives are journeys with succeeding stages, progressive and productive when we travel Jesus' way. Like athletes we have a goal to reach, a finish line, a place to go, a purpose for which to strive. Life is drama. "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players." So thought Shakespeare and, in a way, he was right of course. We all play our parts and do our "exits" and "entrances." And, in the end, we are as we began: "A second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." [*As You Like It*, 2/7]

It doesn't matter whether the world explodes with a bang or withdraws in a whimper. It doesn't matter whether it ends in the middle of a way or at the taking of Holy Communion. All that matters is that we are part of the plot,

players in the cosmic drama which Jesus describes in the gospel--ready always to play our parts with enthusiasm and perseverance.

Back in the days when I was doing a lot of community theatre work, I remember a Director who just knew how to get us to all to do our best in the productions quoting the famous words of Milan Kundera: "There are no small parts. Only small actors." I think Jesus would agree with that in the bigger picture of the life of the world itself; he wants us to all be there for the applause at the final curtain call, for he says "*the one who endures to the end will be saved.*"

On this first Sunday of Advent 2008, this is the world into which we have been placed. It is fragile; it is troubled. It is beautiful; it is hope-filled. It is the world that God still loves. Here in our world and in our time, we will be given opportunities to do important things: opportunities for service in the aid of others, opportunities to share the good news of God, opportunities for the living of truly Christian lives. And we will be given all that we really need to get ready to meet God in our own deaths or even in the death of the world.

How will we respond? Will we receive these gifts and make our lives all that they can be? Or will we shrink away in fear? Will we know and do what is most important? Or will we be paralysed in our confusion?

Aren't we fortunate that the first people who heard the 13th chapter of Mark's gospel were brave, optimistic, faith-filled and persistent? We are here today because of them. Who will be here tomorrow because of us?

Everything we think, do and say is important when we are acting in the drama of our faith. And every day gives us more opportunities to live fully and well, if only we notice.

We must not let the world just pass us by
on its way
to its end.