
Sunday 29th November – The First Sunday of Advent

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9 & Mark 13:24-37

Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!
For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.
But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?
All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have given us over to our sins.

Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;

do not remember our sins for ever.
Oh, look upon us we pray,
for we are all your people..

Matthew 25:14-30

‘But in those days, following that distress,
“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

‘At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

‘Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

The day and hour unknown

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: he leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

‘Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: “Watch!”’

Reflection

I was immediately struck by some descriptions of God we do not normally focus on in both these passages, old and new testament.

Isaiah

*so that the mountains would quake at your presence
so that the nations might tremble at your presence
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence*

but you were angry

Mark

In those days after the suffering, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light

The stars will be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken

I know its awkward and can be quite scary, but this is the God who made us. This is the God we worship. It is there in black and white on the page (or screen). His presence can make mountains quake and nations tremble, the heavens shake. What does that make us feel? In fact, these are not isolated biblical stories about God. There is an urge to immediately rush on and look for the other passages which paint a much nicer picture to give us reassurance, especially with what we are facing now with COVID. But the reality is, God is that powerful, as well as being everywhere and all knowing; omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. That is the God we know. In and of themselves the three “omnis” are potentially overwhelming and intrusive facts about him which are not reassuring.

I then reflected on the contrast of the widely differing images and impressions of God in the Bible, and how I might want to be close to some, but far away or even dismiss others from my mind. However, I am not sure a preference to focus mainly on the nicer ones helps as much we think. Ignoring or denying quaking and trembling at his presence and the heavens being shaken does not make them go away as biblical descriptions of him. Its there written down, and at first glance it is not very palatable.

I Kings 19 tells a revealing story about Elijah, which uses the contrast to move our understanding on. Standing on a mountain where God told him to, a wind passed by and tore the mountains apart, followed by an earthquake and a fire. But the Lord was not in them. After the Fire came a gentle whisper and there he was.

The reality is the powerful, and potentially overpowering nature of God is just as much a part of him as the loving God who cares so deeply for us and showed it by going to the cross. The stark contrast in his character is what makes the sacrifice on the cross and the love so much more reassuring. The bigger the contrast between what he could do to harm us, and the fact that he does not because of his love, the more reassuring our relationship and reliance on him really is.

Much food for thought.... and deeper reassurance.

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