

My sisters and brothers in Christ,

Frightening, cryptic, negative, discouraging. We just heard the first 8 verses of chapter 13, and the remainder of the chapter is about the same. Chapter 13 – it's called The Little Apocalypse. The Big Apocalypse is the last book in the Bible – the Revelation to John. For people who like apocalyptic literature, chapter 13 is a great read. I don't especially care for apocalyptic literature, or predictive literature that purports to know exactly when the world will end. So far, over the centuries, such end time predictions have been 100 percent wrong. We're still here.

Maybe you remember the prediction that the world would end in a great flood on December 21, 1954. A woman in Chicago said she had received secret messages about this. A cult formed around her. People left jobs, school, spouses, gave away money and possessions – and waited for a flying saucer to rescue them as true believers. When nothing happened, the leader of the group said she had just received another message that the cataclysm had been called off. She said: "The little group, sitting all night long, had spread so much light that God had saved the world from destruction." So that's how things were in Chicago.

Back to the text at hand: All Christians are not alike. You may have noticed that. One point of difference concerns the Apocalypse and the present world. Historically, Anglicans and Episcopalians in general have had a rather optimistic outlook theologically. We do not live in mortal fear and anxiety that the end of the world is just around the corner. We are uncomfortable with the idea of an Elect who will be swept up and saved while the rest of the people are trashed. Whatever happened to God's love for humanity? We are skeptical of doomsaying prophets – Christian fear mongers who make predictions that get headlines in the tabloids we see in the supermarket check-out lanes (the valley of temptation whose sides are lined with candy, chocolate and other sweets – better get some before the end of the world).

As Anglicans, we are more concerned with living life in the present world, with fixing things and our selves in this world, with taking care of God's creation, with helping those in need, and with being Christ's hand and Christ's heart here and now.

Putting the apocalypse first, rather than living the Word now, can lead to unfortunate consequences. For example, if you feel you *are* one of the Elect and will be swept up in the Rapture coming very soon, what incentive is there for serving people who are the have-nots? What incentive is there for protecting our land, our water, our air and all of God's creatures? You might as well trash all that now because you won't need them in the future! The world is going to be destroyed anyway.

It's that kind of thinking, of course, that is opposed to any restraint on our exploitation of God's creation. Apocalyptic thinking feeds into a rejection of environmental and social concerns. It's a Cult of Denial. Rape the waters, the land, the air – go ahead, squeeze out every dollar, and turn everything to garbage. You won't need all that stuff in the future because there will be no future. Go ahead *now* and desecrate God's gifts to us.

Biblical scholars point out that Mark's Chapter 13 is similar to Jewish apocalyptic writings that circulated a century or two before and after the birth of Jesus. These writings have one common theme: pessimistic visions of an imminent giant cataclysm in which God destroys everything, except the few chosen ones, who are taken by God into the kingdom.

As you might expect, there is quite a difference of opinion about what chapter 13 in Mark means, and it runs the gamut from biblical literalists to those who take a more nuanced interpretive approach to understanding scripture. And, there are all kinds of questions: what did the imagery mean to the author of the chapter? How did the original hearers and readers of the chapter understand the imagery? How should we bring it into *our* lives as Christians?

We need to keep in mind that the Gospel of Mark probably was written between the years 68 and 73. That puts it at the same time as the Jewish Revolt – the Roman-Jewish War – that led to slaughter and starvation of Jews in Jerusalem, and to the defiling and destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70. No one was safe from persecution. “Christians” were (still) Jews at this time, and would be for another generation. They were Jewish followers of Jesus.

Perhaps the imagery in this chapter was to stand as a reminder of the terrible conditions under which the Jesus Movement – the forerunner of the church – had to live. Mark was writing to a community of Jesus' followers who were in the process of defining themselves as Christians and still locating themselves in a religious panorama that was hostile, threatening and uncertain.

The writer of this Gospel drew on the teachings of Jesus about the end of time – about the trials and tribulations through which they were being put – and the writer offered hearers the caution and strength that came from the memory of the words of Jesus.

All who heard it may have been moved by hope, even in a time of persecution, for they could feel even in the worst of times that the Kingdom of God was indeed to come – that God's reign cannot be prevented by human turmoil. The Little Apocalypse gives us God's *assurance* that we will find comfort and salvation.

What we *today* are called to remember is that we have God's work to do, right here – that even in the midst of our own private fears and weaknesses – even as we grow daily into being Christians – we are called to listen and to carry out what we discern to be God's will.

Watch out for deceivers. Persist in adversity. Take heart and press on.

As the disciples learned in this chapter of Mark: we do not know the day or the hour when Christ will come in glory. We do not know when or how the Kingdom will be opened to us. And that makes each moment of our lives pregnant with possibility and expectation. That hope and anticipation should dignify and exalt what we do that is truly in his Name.

We await his coming in Glory – we await his breaking into our lives. We remember this, especially as we go through the darkness of Advent.

So, apocalyptic literature, predictive claims about the end of time: writing that pretends to reveal things that are normally hidden: dreadful times, painful human existence amidst suffering, terror, and fear.

I think it's fair to say that we Anglicans and Episcopalians have a different view of what's going on. Rather than looking for signs of doom, we are apt to look for sources of hope, we are apt to look for positive expectation.

The end – if there is one – cannot be predicted by looking, say, at society's decaying moral standards, or at the intestines of animals.

Frankly, I have never worried, even for one second, whether I am in the Elect, if there is one. I have never worried about the end time. What I do worry about is whether I'm doing enough now to curb human suffering, whether I'm doing enough now to stop the destruction of our planet, God's gift to us. ✠