

Bruton Parish Church
The First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2011
The Reverend Charles A. Robinson

Welcome to the Apocalypse! Today is the end of the world as we know it, and it is fine.¹

The First Sunday of Advent always brings us scripture readings with an apocalyptic focus. This year we begin our journey through the Gospel of Mark with that writer's apocalyptic reflections.

The passages that lead up to this Gospel paint a seemingly typical arrangement of dark and portentous descriptions - wars, earthquakes, famine, and persecution. Throughout the centuries, such descriptions have been used to imagine that these types of events are predictors of a cataclysmic end to all things. You may have missed it, but the world was to have ended on October 21st. However, if you did, another such prediction will be along soon. A modern, but completely erroneous understanding of the meaning of the word apocalypse imagines that it exclusively refers to the end of the world.

These are times like other times when events of the world often seem overwhelming. Specific events are not important nor will events ever be predictable. The problem with looking for absolutes and literal end-time events is that such events happen in every time.

A small group of the disciples asked Jesus to tell them exactly when the events he described would happen. Jesus described for them a time like anytime - a time of war, of famine, of natural disaster, of having to stand against oppression, persecution, and betrayal.

The writer of The Gospel of Mark presents Jesus specifically exhorting his disciples not to be distracted by distressing events and cautioning them against using crises as indicators and predictors. Instead, he calls for persistence and vigilance – “Keep awake.” Of course, distressing times of war, earthquakes, famine, and persecution are always present.

These times, says Jesus, are the times that give an opportunity to testify and to endure. It is a time that Mark sees as he is writing his Gospel. The oppression of the Roman state has reached extreme proportions and the Temple either has or soon will be destroyed.

For those to whom Mark writes, it was the end of the world, as they knew it. It is a time, like our own, where peace is elusive and the future is uncertain, where our own figurative sacred temples of commerce and finance are threatened and may be destroyed, and where ancient foes in the Middle East continue in unrest. It is a time of huge natural disasters – earthquakes in unexpected places, record-breaking hurricanes. It is not a time for fear. It is actually the time for great hope.

¹ Apologies to R.E.M.

When Paul addresses the Corinthians, he writes, in a very long sentence, of God’s grace, enrichment, and proliferation of spiritual gifts.² These gifts are to be shared in the fellowship of Jesus Christ to which the Corinthians (and we) are called and to which God is faithful, while waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is that word, “revealing,” that is the word, apocalypse.³ The revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ in our fellowship, our community together, so that we might share and proliferate the gifts found amongst us. This then is living into the apocalypse for the sake of the Gospel in our time and place, no matter its circumstances.

Many of the sermons that have been preached in this parish over the last couple of years, have a frequent and recurring theme of change. Some have complained about all the changes that this parish has endured and has yet to endure. Well, my friends, if change were done merely for the sake of being different, then it would probably not be productive. However, today’s Gospel imperative and Epistle admonition call us to be vigilant in the transformative change of our world utilizing our individual and community spiritual gifts. That requires us to change for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yesterday’s convention cannot bring the Gospel to today.

In Advent, we will spend this season anticipating the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ and reflecting upon how that same Lord inhabits our lives today. The apocalyptic message is to be found alert at all times and to be about the work of our Lord. This is good news! There is the hope! We are privileged and gifted to share God’s grace and peace with our time and in our place.

The message is that in the midst of potential destruction and uncertainty, of turmoil and persecution and even death, we can and will find ourselves about the business of the Gospel. In the midst of death is resurrection!

² χάρισματι noun dative neuter singular from χάρισμα

[Fri] χάρισμα, ατος, τό a verbal noun from χαρίζομαι (*give*); denoting *what has been given, gift*, (1) as the result of a gracious act of God *gift of grace, favor bestowed, benefit*, with the meaning varying according to the context: *privileges granted* (RO 11.29), *rescue from danger* (2C 1.11), *gift of redemption* (RO 5.15-16); (2) as a concrete manifestation of grace in the form of extraordinary powers given to individuals, often in the plural *gifts, special abilities* (RO 12.6); the *ability* to be self-restrained in matters of sex (1C 7.7); the bestowal of *special ability* given through ordination *what God has given, endowment* (1T 4.14; 1P 4.10)

χάρισμα N-AN-S χάρισμα
χάρισμα N-NN-S χάρισμα
χαρίσματι N-DN-P χάρισμα

³ αποκάλυψιν noun accusative feminine singular common from ἀποκάλυψις

[Fri] ἀποκάλυψις, εως, ἡ literally, as an action *uncovering, disclosing, revealing*; figuratively in the NT; (1) generally, of what God discloses or makes known *revelation, disclosure*, e.g. his plan of redemption (EP 3.3); (2) as an end-time event *revelation, appearing* (RO 2.5; 1P 1.7); (3) of particular forms of disclosure, as through vision (RV 1.1) and personal guidance (GA 2.2)

There is no special day or time to be about the business of our Lord. This is the day. Keep Awake! Today and everyday is the end of the world as we know it and it is fine. Welcome to the Apocalypse!

Blessed be the name of God†