

## **Sermon, 19 November 2006—Proper 28**

Daniel 12:1-13; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:31-9; Mark 13:14-23

In my first sermon here, back in September, I made the comment that two of the hardest things we Christians have to do is to hear clearly what Scripture says and to speak truly what we know about God. Those two challenges will occupy us for the rest of our life. But this Sunday and the next our lessons offer us opportunities to begin to approach them. Today, I will talk about hearing clearly what Scripture says—or what it means, as today’s Collect puts it, to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” Scripture.

We heard today a portion of Jesus’ final secret teaching. According to Mark, Jesus has left the Temple, left Jerusalem, left the crowd, and even left the Twelve; he is seated on the Mount of Olives, facing the city. Peter and Andrew and James and John interrupt his solitude, anxious about what he said about the destruction of the Temple, and they ask him when that will be. Jesus then begins his teaching about the end times, the Little Apocalypse.

This final speech reaches a troubling intensity unequalled elsewhere in Jesus’ teaching. Every layer of this discourse is alarming. Its content is persecution and suffering, political and cosmic cataclysm. Its construction is a patchwork of quotations from a hallucinatory book written during Jewish persecution under Greek rule. Its place in the Gospel is prophetic and ominous, since immediately after this, Jesus is arrested and executed. Its audience is private and its intention therefore secret, to be withheld from the many and reserved for a select few. Even its form is irregular and urgent and unstable, since the flow of Jesus’ speech is interrupted with one of the most bizarre comments in Scripture: “let the reader understand!”

“Let the reader understand!” There you have it. That, in a nutshell, is what the entire Bible is muttering as you study it. Here, suddenly, the point

of it all tears the page open. For one boundary-violating supernatural moment, the hand of someone—Mark? Jesus? God?—rises up off the page to grab you by the throat and to shake you awake. Are you listening? Are you hearing? Are you understanding? And given the life-transforming power of everything in the Gospels, any alert reader would be alarmed to think that this, out of all that is there, is the moment when the author becomes so anxious about his message that he jabs you with his stylus to get you to pay attention. So let me repeat myself: one of the hardest things we Christians have to do is to hear clearly what Scripture says—and here, for once, Scripture itself warns us that what it is saying is not clear.

So let's peel some of the skins off this onion.

“Let the reader understand!” The content of Jesus' speech is a warning of political and cosmic cataclysm. The “desolating sacrilege having stood where he ought not to be” remains indecipherable, even in the original Greek. A plausible explanation is the Emperor Caligula's attempt to set up a statue of himself in the Jerusalem Temple—but he did not manage to do that. Another is the destruction of the Temple itself when Jerusalem fell—but Jesus' words suggest a standing violation, not demolition. If Mark wrote between the persecution of Nero in the year 64 and the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70, then his anticipatory dread of the self-destructive course the Jews and the Romans were on could have guided his recollection of Jesus' words. Rome was ruthless in repressing rebellion; it would not hesitate to humiliate a defeated people by the sacrilegious desolation of its house of worship—but what that might be, neither Jesus nor Mark could know. The reader must understand that sullen resentment results in desolating sacrilege.

But the reader must also understand that these things have happened before, and this discourse calls our attention to the patterns of history and the

reliability of God's intervention there by being constructed as a patchwork of quotations from the Book of Daniel. In fact, Matthew, in reworking this passage for his Gospel, adds that the desolating sacrilege "was spoken of by the prophet Daniel." The enduring power of God's words and the intractable recalcitrance of human nature are apparent in the ongoing applicability of Daniel's vision: times of anguish recur, each one such as has never occurred since nations came into existence, and the wise shine like a bright sky in every generation. The people of Israel had already survived the ravages of Greek tyrants during the time of the Maccabees, as the Book of Daniel described; just so, Jesus insists, God's elect will survive the desolating sacrilege of the Romans. That is what the reader is to understand: remember the Book of Daniel, remember that persecution, remember that endurance, and remember God's deliverance of his faithful people then. Let the reader understand that, as Daniel described, the moment of social catastrophe is when the glory of God is manifest in human endurance and divine delivery.

So let the reader understand a third thing: by placing these words immediately before Jesus' arrest and execution, Mark has Jesus place himself and his followers in the middle of the trajectory of God's liberating work—and in doing so, Jesus describes the consequences of being his follower. If we follow him, we follow him also into a death like his. The desolating sacrilege is not only what might happen where it ought not to happen in the City of Jerusalem, but what did happen to the body of the Son of God, what did happen to the Christian martyrs under Nero, and what Mark wants his readers to understand might happen to them as well. What the reader is to understand is that Jesus, who died on a cross, as is depicted in the Gospel, predicted a similar trial for the reader, if the reader remains as faithful as Jesus was to the Good News of God. Just as Jesus, speaking,

faced his death, so the readers, reading, face their death. The boundary-breaking interruption into the text by the writer alerts the reader to the fact that what matters, what they must pay attention to, what they must be ready for, lies beyond the boundary line that marks the end of this Gospel text; what matters will happen after we read. The terrain we traverse is off the map. The crucial moment is the moment beyond the boundary of the present in which we read. Jesus' future, as he spoke these words, was crucifixion and resurrection; what is your future, if you follow him? We, the readers who read Jesus' story, must understand that, if we not simply read his story, but actually follow him, his story will become ours.

So, "let the reader understand" that the courage to follow Jesus has always been something that only a few have received. The truth that "we no longer live, but that Christ lives in us," remains the Church's best kept secret, even though it is a very public secret, because it is proclaimed and prayed and promised every Sunday. Mark himself depicts this: Jesus' most intimate disciples cluster around him to hear this depiction of the demolition of the world they understand. They must have shuddered and mentally repulsed his words. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," as we heard today. None of us want our lives disrupted, whether by brutality and betrayal, or illness and loss, or catastrophe and cataclysm, or even by the seduction and titillation of omens and signs. We are eager, at those times, for false prophets who have the answer, who can say, "I am the one, I can reassure you and explain it to you." But Jesus' final words are, "don't fall for it, don't fall asleep, stay awake for all your suffering and disorientation, and hold on." But, my dear sisters and brothers, when the desolating sacrilege arrives, if you are like me, our first hope is that we can either sleep through it or sleep it off; and if you are like me, staying awake is

only possible and only enduring if we no longer live, but Christ lives in us, if we possess something better and more lasting than what we are losing in the tribulation.

Finally, let the reader understand that it is by reading that we come to understand. Only the reader of the Book of Daniel could recognize the reconstitution of the desolating sacrilege from Daniel's text for the purposes of Mark's text. Only the reader of the Gospel of Mark can recognize the pattern of Jesus' life in the lives of his followers, just as the writer to the Hebrews recognizes their faithfulness to Christ in their endurance through suffering and their care of those publicly exposed to abuse and persecution. The point is that God is faithful; God's intervention in one generation will be repeated in another, and we must be familiar with the story of those earlier generations in order to welcome God's intervention repeated in our own day. The shape of God's people endures over time: our trust in God, our reliance on God, our commitment to God's intention to liberate and restore and reconcile all things, and our readiness to give ourselves in order to bring all of Creation to the fullness God intends for it. So we read Scripture and we remain attentive to our life and our world. As we read Scripture, some verse will open out off the page to us, illuminating a moment in our life. As we remain attentive to our life, some moment will deepen around us, illustrating a passage of Scripture—an instance of judgment, an infusion of grace—so that our lives conform to the shape of the story of God's people. Just as Jesus' speech is interrupted, so our own study of Scripture and our own attention to our life is interrupted by insights brought by the Holy Spirit—the depths of God's Word calling to the depths of our lives, and the depths of our lives calling to the depths of God's Word, because it is one Spirit at

work in both, guiding and strengthening us to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” all Truth.

So, yes, at all times and in all places, by every means available, “let the reader understand!” Let us “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” our Scripture and strive to understand, not only the sacrilege Mark feared in his day, but also the prophetic texts that shaped his own writing, the life of Christ that shows us what our own life is to be, and the way Scripture and our life in the world inform each other. But remember, my dear brothers and sisters, that all our effort to see clearly what Scripture says is undertaken so that our understanding can produce in us just compassionate action. And remember that both our understanding and our action are undertaken in order to be dissolved ultimately into the praise of God, who is our Eternal Source, our Only-begotten Word, and our Life-giving Spirit, the one God, whose peace passes all understanding and whom we hope to contemplate in glory through all eternity.