

Simple holy faces

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, November 15, 2009: The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Mark 13:1-8.*

“The end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” So proclaims the Jesus of Mark’s gospel. It is also just the beginning of several weeks when the gospel lessons provide a field day for those who search the scripture looking for clues about the end of time.

Such fretting has been part of my religious consciousness for as long as I can remember. Though my parents to their eternal credit had little interest in this end-of-time business, I grew up in a church culture that proclaimed this stuff as truth. In my youth group, which sadly involved a good bit of guitar playing and singing in a basement we tragically called a coffee shop (hip we weren’t), I learned a song titled, “I Wish We Had All Been Ready.” I still remember some of the lyrics:

*Life was filled with guns and war;
everyone got trampled on the floor.
I wish we'd all been ready.
A man and wife asleep in bed, she
hears a noise and turns her head, he's
gone.
I wish we'd all been ready.
Two men walking up a hill, one
disappears and one's left standing still.
I wish we'd all been ready.
There's no time to change your mind;
the Son has come and you've been left
behind.*

The fact that I have a religious bone in my

body is either a miracle or evidence of a serious and lingering disorder. And, yet, lest you think that such carrying on is no more than an instance from my singular and sad past, think again. From 2005 to the current date, the “left-behind” books, a series of apocalyptic novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins about the end of time, have sold nearly 75 million copies in the U. S. That means that one of four persons in this country—not households but individuals—has read these frightening novels.

And we are part of the problem, *we* being the mainline church which has been timid in outright rejecting this kind of theology because doing so means that we have to get honest about how we “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the scripture we call Holy. It is passages, such as the one read from the gospel of Mark this morning, that if left unreconstructed not only embarrass us but also weaken our voice as faithful people in our modern era.

An honest look at any scripture begins with its context. Just a few points about what life was like during this time shed light on this genre of literature, known as apocalyptic.

- ❖ The gospel of Mark was probably written around 70 AD.
- ❖ For nearly 400 years, the Israel had been occupied in one way or another, beginning with Alexander the Great in 300 BC.
- ❖ Tensions with Rome, the occupying force at the time of Mark’s gospel, had boiled over, one of the Roman-Jewish wars having begun in 66 AD.
- ❖ Zealots pledged to fight to the end; clerics and the aristocracy wanted it both ways; and Rome was growing more and more

weariness of the troublesome Jews.

- ❖ In 70, Titus began a deadly siege on the city of Jerusalem with the help of 60,000 soldiers, a huge bloodbath ensued, and the Temple was burned.

At the time of this writing, then, persecution had been replaced with more persecution, misery added upon more misery. For thinkers and writers, some way of accommodating this sad state of affairs had to be reached. The already existing genre of apocalypse was the perfect medium. They could not imagine that life could get worse, concluding that the only way out was a dramatic, cataclysmic reshuffling of power, an apocalypse. Though it would come at the cost of much upheaval, now or very soon, the wrongs, political and otherwise, of their lives finally would be set right.

Little wonder that the Jesus of Mark's gospel and the other synoptic ones would be conversant in this prevailing way of writing and speaking. But is that still our view of the world? We know the guys holding the loudspeaker and the placard in Times Square believe it, but do we? How this passage, shaped by apocalyptic writing in the first century, somehow got translated as the basis of our understanding of the Second Coming is increasingly mysterious to me. Something went terribly, terribly wrong in telling the Good News of Christ in the world. Somehow a message of love and redemption, of hope and promise got co-opted by a message of doom and destruction. And before we knew it, we had a Messiah who sounded like an action figure in a bad movie.

Now here is where the being honest part comes in. This is risky because some of you may indeed believe in the coming of this kind of cataclysmic event. If so, you are in good and populous company. And if you are right, you will get the last laugh. My position, though, is that most of us do not believe that this is how history will be unfolded; and we need to get honest about it. Unless we face this scripture and others like it in a thoughtful and systematic way, we will continue to simply concede the expression of what Christians believe to the fundamentalists.

Who knows? I don't. I can only tell you that I do not believe that all of history is being hurled toward such a climax. Further, I don't believe that our creed or our orthodoxy requires that we accept only this interpretation of the fullness of God's plan for us. Like Mark and his contemporaries, we sometimes wonder if the hopelessness and despair of our age are not of such immense proportion that the end must be near. Every age has on some level thought that its time was the worst. Yet, enough centuries have passed between Mark and us for us to know that suffering exists in every age; and that bad times, times of disbelief and wickedness, do not necessarily signal the end of anything. If that were the case, the world would have long since come to an end. Over time, we have come to understand suffering and dilemmas of all sorts and conditions simply to be part of what it means to be human.

So . . . if we question the whole end of the world bang, what *do* we believe about Jesus' return in glory, that event to which we pay credal adherence every week: "he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead"? I can't answer that for you; but I would be less than honest if I claimed to believe it literally. I do not. Such thinking rests on an ancient view of the universe to which we no longer adhere. Does that mean that we no longer believe in the second coming? It doesn't for me. In fact, I emphatically believe in it—perhaps now more than ever, but let me tell you how.

One of Walker Percy's novels, *The Second Coming*, illustrates how and what I believe. The main character, Will Barrett, retires too early from his Wall Street law practice and moves to the country. When his wife dies unexpectedly and he becomes deeply estranged from his daughter, he becomes involved in a series of meaningless relationships. Concluding that his life is no longer bearable, he walks into a nearby cave to commit suicide. As he enters the cave, he plunges through a dark hole, explodes on a hard surface, and blacks out.

But then he wakes up; he is not dead. Having fallen through an airshaft that carries

warm air into a greenhouse, he awakens to find a young woman who has escaped from a mental hospital. She is rebuilding the greenhouse. Though obviously emotionally ill, she gives him the gifts of water, time, and attention as slowly he mends. In the end as their hearts touch, their relationship becomes for each of them a second coming. We learn that she has a better handle on life than those who locked her up, and she gives Will a reason to live. His heart leaping with secret joy, Will ponders: "What is it I want from her, not only want but must have? Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simply holy face?"

Yes, the Lord is here among us, becoming known to us in the most extraordinary and unexpected ways. No doctrine could ever describe any better what I believe about the second coming. Christ comes to us a second

time, a third time, and again and again—as often as we breathe.

If we read, mark, learn, and digest these scriptures in this metaphorical way, are we stripping them of their power? Each, of course, must answer for him/herself. For me the answer is clearly no. In fact, hearing them with our hearts and minds becomes even more urgent. Every moment we live is an apocalyptic moment; each moment that passes is a moment that is gone forever. In the coming weeks we shall hear a great deal about preparedness. The preparedness to which we are called is not to be ready for some future event but to be ready now. The Second Coming is past, present and future for the Lord is indeed here masquerading behind our simple holy faces!

In the name of God: *Amen*.

©2009 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022, or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.