



First Sunday of Advent (30 November 2014)
Isa 64:1-9, Ps 80:1-7, 17-19, 1 Cor 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

Theme: *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will not pass away.*

At the beginning of a season when western society is in the midst of flurried preparations for Christmas, the readings for the First Sunday of Advent provide a sobering perspective on the coming (*parousia*) of the Messiah, the Day of the Lord, when “after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory” (Mark 13:24-26). The apocalyptic prophecies of Mark 13, like the words of the other readings, were written in times of turmoil and anxiety for the people of God, forged in times of war, persecution and exile: “Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people” (Isa 64:9); “Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (Ps 80:7). The apocalyptic visions of Mark’s Gospel, in particular, reflect the hopes and fears of a church in the aftermath of the First Jewish War (66-70 C.E.), when the holy land had been conquered by Rome after a fierce and protracted Jewish rebellion, and Jerusalem and the Temple were in ruins: “This was the end which Jerusalem came to by the madness of those that were for innovations; a city otherwise of great magnificence, and of mighty fame among all [hu]mankind” (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 6.1.1). Mark 13, like other New Testament apocalyptic literature, belongs to a Second Temple Jewish tradition which interpreted Israel’s trials, transposed to the church, as part of the divine plan, which was coming to fruition in their own time, the conclusion of an age where evil raged on a cosmic scale, but where the good immanent in the world would be realized when the power of evil had run its course (see 4 Ezra 5:1-13; 4:27-29; 14:16-18; 2 Bar 27; 1 Enoch 91:5-7; 1 QPHab 2:1-10) (Malherbe, 418). For Mark’s audience, the promised advent of the Human One (*ho huios tou anthrōpou*) (13:26) was a message of imminent hope and joy.

The readings juxtapose the vivid apocalyptic hope of Mark 13 with the poetic recollection of the awe-inspiring gift of Torah on Mount Sinai (Isa 64:1-9). Here, the prophet wishes for a recurrence of the divine epiphany of ancient times: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence ... When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence” (Isa 64:1, 3; cf. Exod 19:16-18). Like the Marcan prophecy, Isaiah longs for the arrival of God in the midst of Israel’s exile and the destruction of the holy city and temple many centuries earlier (587-538 BCE). For Isaiah, the presence of God is manifested not just in the mystery of theophany, but in the Torah observance (“righteousness”) of the people: “You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways” (64:5). In different ways, the readings of the Season express the longing of people of faith for *immanu-El*—God with Us (Matt 1:23; Isa 7:10-16)—in Torah and Messiah.

For Reflection and Discussion: (1) How can we be sensitive to “God with us” during Advent—and in our everyday lives? (2) How does the Jewish way of experiencing the presence of God (*Shekhinah*) through Torah relate to Christian life?

Bibliography: Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Anchor Bible Commentary 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000); William Whiston, trans., *The Works of Josephus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987).

This week’s Sunday Gospel Commentary was prepared by
Mary Ann Beavis, Ph.D. (Bat Kol Alumna 2004, 2006, 2012)
St. Thomas More College, Saskatoon, SK Canada
Email: mbeavis@stmcollege.ca

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maureena@batkol.info | www.batkol.info