



**Isaiah 64.1-9**  
**Mark 13.24-37**  
**29<sup>th</sup> November 2020 ADVENT I**

**Watchful Living**

**INTRODUCING MARK**

On this Advent Sunday 2020 we move, in our services, from regularly hearing from Matthew's gospel to Mark's.

It's the shortest and earliest of them all.

Mark wrote against the backdrop of living in an occupied country and many were looking for a Jewish leader to rise up and speak out for the people. Along with others, in the first-generation Church, Mark believed that Jesus was that person. And yet, this Jesus didn't fit everyone's idea of the expected one.

So, Mark writes a gospel and it's really a book of two halves. Actually, to call it that is somewhat misleading. It wasn't a book, as we know it, but a scroll written with a text that didn't have punctuation, which meant people made more sense out of it as it was read aloud, putting in the form and structure along the way.

The first nine chapters describe the ministry of this Jesus up in the region of Galilee. After many of his sermons and miracles Jesus asks the crowd to keep quiet. Maybe he'd realised that even he had not quite convinced them of who he really was and the last thing he wanted was them portraying him to others with a spin he simply didn't own.

There's something of a crunch moment in the middle of the gospel as Jesus pushes his disciples to answer the question: Who do you say that I am? Still a question we need to ponder and take seriously today.

So, the second half of Mark reveals who this Jesus might be. In

chapters 11-16 we have the story of just one week in his life, the days he spent in Jerusalem leading up to the cross.

Some have even said that Mark's gospel is really the story of this final week (after all, it fills over a third of the book) with an extended introduction.

Obviously these days are massively important to Mark. On Good Friday Jesus will die. This is God's servant who will love instead of hate, who will forgive instead of bearing grudges, who will live with compassionate justice instead of wielding selfish power. And surely there's a message there.

Mark knows that faith is sometimes, perhaps even often, very confusing. He's honest about that. He knows the Jesus he presents is not the one many had hoped for. Even his abrupt ending lingers in confusion with only rumours of resurrection. It's up to others to fill in the last chapter, with an ending that probably wasn't his.

So, we begin our journey with Mark today, he'll be our companion until this time next year as we, once again, return regularly in these next twelve months to that question: who was this Jesus and what did he teach us about God not just in what he said, but also through the way he lived and died?

(A great introductory video to watch about Mark comes from the Bible Project people at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVRixfameGY>)

## WATCHFUL LIVING

Today's Gospel reading is part of the longest speech Mark gives to Jesus in the whole of the book.

These long speeches were called *Testaments* in that first century world. They were thought of as important last words; the sort to be

remembered and worthy of revisiting.

Like many of his contemporaries in the Early Church Mark felt he was living in the last days before Jesus' Second Coming. He's convinced of two things. Firstly, nobody, absolutely no one, knows the date of that coming; and secondly, in our waiting we should live every day with a defiant sense of hope at the centre of our faith.

*Keep watch*, he says.

Mark's world and the context of those first Christians was at a moment in history when the peace between Rome and Israel had broken down. From the year 66 to 74 they were at war with each other; the most obvious sign of which was the destruction by Rome of Israel's second temple in AD70. These were days of despair and no wonder thoughts turned to the end of the world.

Yet, by passing on Jesus' Testament speech here in chapter 13, Mark is urging those around him to keep a sense of hope and trust in their lives. To look to God and keep watch for his presence.

I read a story the other day of a father who lost his toddler in a giant Toys-R-Us store. The security guard told him his son had been found at the far end of this huge building, the boy was distressed, surrounded by toys and strangers anxious for his father. That father asked to use the store's tannoy. So, over the system came the father's voice saying: *you can't see me son, but even though you are anxious and worried I know where you are and I'm coming.*

Mark is clearly longing that those around him in the early church have a similar sense of God in their lives. Of a God who is for them, knows about them and cares. Living with such a belief brings light even on the darkest of days.

And this wasn't just a hard time, it was also a long time.

This call, to keep watch for the Lord, is one that repeatedly fills the books of the bible. Again, and again it needs to be heard.

We think of the many psalms that urge us to live, at one and the same time, with a sense of patience alongside a spirit of trust. Words like those in Psalm 27: *Wait on the Lord and be of good courage*, and of Psalm 40: *I waited patiently for the Lord and he inclined unto me and heard my cry*.

This feels very much like an appropriate theme for Advent, a time of waiting and preparing.

Perhaps this year we are waiting like never before! Not so much for Christmas as for 2021. Waiting to reach the year's end so that we can finally enter a New Year which beckons with the hope of a vaccine.

Yet, this ancient wisdom is there to remind us that every time of waiting, including this one, has a potentially meaningful journey as part of the process.

I sometimes think it's like the difference between driving and walking.

Maybe I shouldn't admit this, but I guess I'm not alone in saying there are times I drive somewhere in the car and arrive without any sense of the journey I've just undertaken. My mind has been elsewhere, and I simply didn't see or appreciate the countryside or townscape through which I passed.

It's often different when walking. Because the pace is slower our senses are more attuned to the noises, smells and sights around us. Indeed, the journey becomes important in and of itself, not just the arrival at our destination.

Keeping watch, when used in this biblical sense, is the idea that God isn't just in the temple, say, at Jerusalem. He's also to be found in the pilgrimage which gets us there. If we truly live in a spirit of watchfulness the presence of God is to be found not just in the destination but also on the journey.

In our reading from the Jewish scriptures today, from a book we

sometime think of as Third Isaiah, there is a sense that people felt God was missing from their times.

During times of exile the Levitical Priests looked after the temple. They were viewed as stop gaps, temporary clergy, rather as we might think of Interim Moderators today during a church's pastoral vacancy. They kept the show on the road, but this wasn't Temple life at its best.

Then, after exile, the Zadokite priests returned to the Temple. At this point it should have all felt different, or at least the writer of Third Isaiah thought so. That was the expectation. Everything had been on hold but now it should be buzzing, yet it wasn't!

That's the reason for the outburst in the opening verses of Isaiah 64: *Why do you not tear asunder the heavens and come down?*

God is accused of being absent. Not only did he not show up during the ministry of the Levitical Priests, but he was also now staying away even though the Zadokite ones had returned.

Or was he?

Surely the point here is that these worshippers were actually missing the point. God was with them in both ministries. He'd never gone away. What was missing wasn't God, but their appreciation of God.

In scripture there is sometimes so much emphasis laid on the concept of the supposed coming Day of The Lord, always in the future tense, that we miss that everyday is *The Day the Lord has made*. We simply forget to *Rejoice and be glad in it*.

We said earlier that Mark's gospel wouldn't have been punctuated with the grammar we are used to. Well, there is that little trick of inserting a word break in a phrase in English that totally transforms its meaning. The same letters are used, but the gaps in between change the meaning.

So the phrase, *God is nowhere*, which is exactly what Isaiah was feeling, can be written differently as *God is now here*, which is the lesson he and his fellow worshippers needed to grasp.

Isaiah and Mark both wrote the words we have heard today in tough times. The challenge for both them and us is to watch for God's presence even at such moments.

Mrs Love Willis (what a name!) was the wife of a Chicago doctor in the 1850's. She put it like this in a verse of a hymn she wrote:

*Not for ever in green pastures  
Do we ask our way to be.  
But the steep and rugged pathway  
May we tread rejoicingly.*

Mark pointed his readers to look forward to The Day of The Lord and to live in hope. I believe our task is to live every day as if it is that Day. For everyday the Lord comes among us if only we keep awake and keep watch for his presence.

Since March we might have felt as if these have been the Missing Months in our church and personal life. We've long since stopped looking at the diary because so much that was planned has come to nothing.

Yet, these have not been months when nothing has happened. It's just happened differently to what we had planned.

God has walked with us every step of the way, never absent, always present. So, in our church community, as in many others, there has been support for each other, commitment shown in financial giving, enthusiasm for worship over the airways or in person. There has also been the silences and absences, the worry and anxieties – yet even in these times of isolation and confusion a loving and compassionate God has always been holding out to us hands of support, reassurance and hope.

Let us never look back at 2020 as if it were a vacant year, best left

unremembered – but as a difficult time that was still The Day of The Lord.

A few years ago I attended an ecumenical retreat out at Gerrard's Cross. It was a beautiful autumn day and maybe it would be understandable to view such a time as a moment to escape. But not for one retreatant, a lady from our church community. She told us, as the day drew to its close, that she had spent the time walking under the trees, praying with the group, thinking about those in Africa suffering from the Ebola outbreak. She had used the day to think how it must be for them. She had searched for God in this crisis. She wanted to find a way of sensing what she could do to help, to pray and to support.

She hadn't used the retreat to escape, instead with great wisdom she had used it to connect faith with life, to search for God even in suffering.

On this, the first Sunday of Advent, in a year for us that has been like no other, Mark's call is Keep Awake, and watch for God. For he is never far away.

May it be so, in the name of the God whose presence always brings hope. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, November 2020*