

Weekly Reading – Monday, November 24, 2008

This Sunday, November 30, 2008, is the first Sunday of Advent, and the first Sunday of a new church year. This means that we get a new gospel, and it is Mark. Advent texts are both wonderful and challenging. Wonderful in their richness of image and provocative nature. Challenging in that the culture at large is stringing up tinsel and singing songs of joy and peace for which the Advent texts are not a smooth fit. Oh well, Christians are to be in but not of the world. Perhaps the "economic crisis" will crack a door open to a different and deeper Advent? (For a bit more on the economic crisis, see "What's Tony Thinking?")

Isaiah 64: 1 - 9

A desperate plea that the Lord might come down, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Not long ago I found myself sitting in a church one Sunday where worship began with "Good morning, how wonderful we are all here," (though "all" wasn't many). From there we moved into a long stretch of announcements, interrupted by a hymn, and then a few more announcements. I found myself praying the words of this text, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . . There is no one that calls on your name or attempts to take hold of you." Worship seems in so many places to have lost a center in God. It is mostly about us, but of course only a small and idealized part of us. It's a combination of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood and a Senior Center. Moreover, it seems increasingly feminine in ways that are not helpful. All pastels. All sweetness and sensitivity. No difficult words, no hard word, allowed. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." "We have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth."

I Corinthians 1: 3 - 9

If there is an overall thematic unity of the texts, and there is, it is signaled here in verse 8, "He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." Such a day, a day when God tears open the heavens and comes down, is at hand. An Advent is at hand. For Paul, the Corinthians and we ourselves live between the advents, between the first and the second coming. We have been touched, blessed, encountered by the living Lord (first coming), but the day when all is complete and "we know as we have been known" (I Cor. 13) has not yet come. In the time between, Paul assures the Corinthians that "God who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful." More than that, the preceding verse, "You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed." Or to put it in a slightly different way, you may not be in control, but you can be faithful. Again, there is the implied the me, mentioned earlier, that as Christians we are "in but not of" the world. We have a different Lord, a different hope, another story, and a different homeland. Advent is, among other things, a call to remember and live toward our true home.

Mark 13: 24 - 37

This initial reading from Mark dovetails nicely with the recent readings from Matthew. Like those there is an emphasis on staying alert and awake because you do not know when your

Master comes. One might preach a sermon here on "knowing that you don't know," and the value of that. Such humility can humanize us. While too much certainty can de-humanize. Buddhists speak of being a disciple as "knowing that you don't know." "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Strange how so many claim to know more than Jesus and do so in his name! Whether he comes or we go, an end and an advent is ever at hand. And now, amid the economic crisis, a different kind of end/advent is at hand. What we imagined made us secure, may not do so. Our security comes from something other than our portfolio, from someone other than the Chairman of the Federal Reserve. The gospel word? "Keep watch," "be on your guard," "be alert!" Years ago in some towns, perhaps still somewhere, there would be the a noon whistle which sounded forth, never pleasant or melodic, more a blast and a call to stop, a call to attention, to alertness. "Stop what you're doing," said the noon whistle, "time's up. Go home." A reminder of another dimension, another power, another time-frame than our own. Advent is such a noon-whistle. Stop what you're doing. Pay attention. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it; the world and all who dwell in it are the Lord's." (Ps. 24)