

Reflection on the Gospel: 1st Sunday of Advent Year B
(Mark 13:33-37)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

“Eyes wide open” is the proper stance for gospel people. The little parable that is the gospel reading for this first Sunday of the new liturgical year forms the conclusion to Mark’s so-called apocalyptic discourse. Apocalyptic literature emerged within Judaism in the context of crisis or persecution. It was intended to provide hope in the midst of disaster: God’s coming can reverse the sufferings of the present. The Markan discourse is delivered as a farewell teaching to the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. The concluding verse indicates that it is intended for a wider audience, however: “what I say to you, I say to all...” Like Peter, James, and John, Christian disciples through the ages are invited to stay awake, to be on the lookout, to be alert.

This cycle of the liturgical year begins and ends with Mark 13 and a focus on the end of the present order of things. It may seem strange to begin the year with such a reflection. Is Advent not a time of preparation for Christmas, for the coming of the Christ child into the world? Mark has no account of the birth of Jesus. His gospel begins with the immediate preparation for the adult ministry of Jesus. From the very outset, his interest is in the coming of God’s reign of justice and compassion. That is, in fact, what Advent is about: living in hopeful expectation that God’s dream for a transformed world might be realised.

The parable of the watchful gatekeeper forms the conclusion to a farewell discourse that the Markan Jesus addresses to his disciples. The disciples are told to be alert and watchful through the four watches of the Roman night: in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, and at dawn. The parable thus foreshadows aspects of Jesus’ suffering that was to be compounded by the abandonment of his closest friends. Peter, James, and John will fall asleep in Gethsemane. The disciples will all disperse and Peter will deny him. We find our own experience mirrored in that of the disciples. It is easy to lose hope in the face of overwhelming violence and even to lose focus.

Advent is about recognising our own tendency to be less than vigilant and even to turn away when our presence is most needed. It is about allowing the grace of God to take hold in our hearts, keeping us watchful for the sake of those on the edge and for the sake of a regenerated Earth. Most of us would agree that our Earth communities are in crisis. We need to be alert to causes as well as to consequences so that the cycles of violence might eventually be broken. Our gospel asks no less of us.