

Mark 13:32-37

³² “But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. ³⁶ May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”

Context

In Liturgical Year B, this reading from the Gospel according to Mark becomes a signpost to the Advent Season as it used the first Sunday of Advent. Many Christians may not realize that the readings for the four Sundays of Advent also follow a regular pattern. On the First Sunday of Advent each year, we hear some of Jesus’ teachings about the “End Times.” In each case, the text is taken from a passage that comes from the end of Gospels when Jesus seems to be speaking about apocalyptic events. The Second and Third Sundays of Advent focus on the preaching of John the Baptist. The emphasis is on the role of John as Herald. Finally, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent the Gospel reading relates to some of the events that immediately preceded Jesus’ birth, including Joseph’s dreams (Year A: Matt 1:18-24), the Annunciation by the angel Gabriel (Year B: Luke 1:26-38), and the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (Year C: Luke 1:39-45).

Our gospel reading is the end piece of the larger “Olivet Discourse” in Mark 13:1-37. In the Gospel of Mark there is no passage more problematic than the prophetic discourse of Jesus on the destruction of the Temple. The questions posed by the form and content of the chapter and by its relationship to the Gospel as a whole are complex and difficult and have been the occasion of an extensive literature. The Olivet discourse is unique as the longest uninterrupted course of private instruction recorded by Mark. Moreover, it is the only extended speech attributed to Jesus by the evangelist. The interpretation of Mark 13 is inevitably colored by critical decisions concerning the character and function of the material, its structured arrangement and essential authenticity.

The Olivet discourse occupies a special position in the Marcan outline. It provides the bridge between Jesus’ public ministry, culminating in the conflict with the Temple authorities (Chs. 11:11–12:12), and the Passion Narrative, where the conflict with authority is the occasion of Jesus’ condemnation and death (Ch. 14:1f., 10f., 42–65). By locating the eschatological discourse in this crucial position, and by recurring reference to the destruction of the Temple in the context of Jesus’ trial and execution (Chs. 14:58; 15:29, 39), the evangelist points to the relationship which exists between the judgment upon Jerusalem implied by the discourse and the death of Jesus. This theological understanding is reflected by the literary form of verses 5–37. Jesus’ words are a farewell address providing instruction and consolation for his disciples just prior to his death. Ch. 13 unites prophecy concerning the future with exhortation regulating the conduct of the disciples in the period when the Master will no longer be with them, and this is characteristic of a farewell discourse.

The primary function of Ch. 13 is not to disclose esoteric information but to promote faith and obedience in a time of distress and upheaval. With profound pastoral concern, Jesus prepared his disciples and the Church for a future period which would entail both persecution and mission. The discourse clearly presupposes a period of historical development between the resurrection and the parousia. The relationship of the necessity of suffering to the experience of vindication and glory established in 8:34–38 is stressed once again by the announcement of the manifestation in glory of the Son of Man in the context of suffering for the people of God.

This message was of profound significance for the Christians of Rome, harassed by persecution and disturbed by the rumors of the developments in Palestine in the sixties. The inclusion of the eschatological discourse in the Gospel was motivated by the same pastoral concern that had prompted Jesus' teaching. Mark cautions his readers that the community is to find its authentic eschatological dimension not in apocalyptic fervor but in obedience to Jesus' call to cross-bearing and evangelism in the confidence that this is the will of God which must be fulfilled before the parousia. Jesus' words provided a bed-rock for Christian hope. The witness of the eschatological community not only focuses on the suffering Son of Man whose crucifixion and resurrection comprise the core of the gospel but also looks forward to the triumphant Son of Man whose appearance represents the one event in light of which the present is illumined. This fact enabled Mark to face the crisis of the sixties with realism and hope.

William Lane outlines Mark 13 as follows:

- Jesus' Prophecy of Impending Destruction. Ch. 13:1–4
- Warning Against Deception. Ch. 13:5–8
- A Call to Steadfastness Under Persecution. Ch. 13:9–13
- The Appalling Sacrilege and the Necessity for Flight. Ch. 13:14–23
- The Triumph of the Son of Man. Ch. 13:24–27
- The Lesson of the Fig Tree. Ch. 13:28–31
- The Call to Vigilance. Ch. 13:32–37

Commentary

Jesus concluded his response by stressing the responsibility of maintaining vigilance. The duty to watch draws its force from the fact that "*no one knows*" the critical moment of God's decisive intervention. "*That day*" evokes a formula hallowed by use in the prophetic Scriptures; it appears with a clearly eschatological resonance in passages which announce the day of Yahweh's appearing (Amos 8:3, 9, 13; 9:11; Mic. 4:6; 5:9; 7:11; Zeph. 1:9f.; 3:11, 16; Obad. 8; Joel 3:18; Zech. 9:16; 12–14 *passim*). Here it designates an indeterminate date which remains the Father's secret. In the light of its association with the theophany of God on the Day of the Lord it must have primary reference to the parousia, the coming of the Son of Man (v.26). Jesus thus affirms that no one knows that day or the hour (the smallest unit of time; cf. verse 11) when the Son of Man will appear in glory with power. In order to understand the relationship of this affirmation to the assurance given in v. 30 that the events preliminary to the destruction of the Temple will occur within the experience of that generation, it is necessary to give full force to the adversative particle in verse 32: "I say to you solemnly, this generation shall not pass away ... As for that day and that hour, *on the contrary*, no one knows ..."

While the parable of the fig tree illustrates the possibility of observing the proximity of the first event, another comparison is developed in connection with v. 32 which underscores the impossibility of knowing the moment of the Lord's return. Verses 30 and 32 concern two distinct events (the taking of Jerusalem by the Romans, and the Day of the Lord, respectively).

The accent falls on the words "*no one knows*," not on the qualification "*neither the angels in heaven nor the Son*." Very early the clause "*nor the Son*" attracted the attention of theologians anxious to trace the christological implications in the confession of ignorance, but in this context it is accidental with respect to Jesus' intention. His purpose was not to define the limits of his theological knowledge, but to indicate that vigilance, not calculation, is required. If the Son of Man (interpreting "the Son" by v. 26) and the angels are ignorant of "*that day*" it is because nothing allows a presentiment of its coming. Its approach is impossible to discern and so to prepare oneself for it. In this respect it stands in sharp contrast to the destruction of Jerusalem, which could be clearly foreseen and its devastation avoided by flight. The day of judgment will arrive so suddenly and unexpectedly that absolutely no one will have

the least warning. That is why vigilance and confident faith are required of the disciples and the Church. Correctly understood, the qualification “nor the Son” indicates that even Jesus had to live by faith and to make obedience and watchfulness the hallmark of his ministry.

Jesus recognized one exception to the true ignorance implied: “*except the Father.*” The determination of the critical moment of intervention rests exclusively with him (cf. Acts 1:6–7). On this point the Father has not delegated his authority to anyone, not even to the Son. The one certainty the disciples may have is that the day will come when God will execute his decision to judge the world, and for that purpose he will send forth his Son with the hosts of angels (Ch. 8:38; 13:26f.). The parousia and the judgment it will inaugurate are matters irrevocably decided. From this perspective the parousia is not conditioned by any other consideration than the sovereign decision of the Father, which remains enveloped with impenetrable mystery.

The exhortations to vigilance which follow are linked to the fact that the critical moment remains unknowable. The connection with v. 32 and with the brief parable which follows is underlined by reference to an ignorance of God’s secret counsel:

- v. 32 “*No one knows that day or that hour ...*”
- v. 33 “*You do not know when the time will come.*”
- v. 35 “*you do not know when the lord of the house is coming.*”

In the parallelism that is developed “that day or that hour,” “the critical moment,” and the moment of the householder’s return are identical expressions for the same reality: the mysterious moment of the divine intervention, which cannot be foreseen. Because the moment of crisis is unknowable, unceasing vigilance is imperative.

This fact is illustrated by the parable of the absent householder, which is peculiar to Mark. A journeying master delegated authority to his servants and assigned each to his work, specifying that the doorkeeper is to watch. These details recall a familiar early Christian pattern of exhortation stressing vigilance and an application of the vigilance concept to the Christian ministry in terms of work and labor. The true servant will want to be actively engaged in his Master’s service when he returns. The danger is “lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping” (v. 36). The imagery of a master who first leaves and then returns suddenly, which is integral to the call to watchfulness, is appropriate to the parousia and serves to make the content of “that day” precise. A subordinate feature of the parable is the reference to the four night-watches in verse 35b, which conforms to the Roman reckoning of time (in contrast to the Jewish practice of dividing the night into three watches). As in Ch. 6:48, Mark has transmitted the tradition he received in a form which would be recognized as familiar to his readers.

This statement serves to recall verse 3, where the question which prompted the eschatological discourse was asked privately by Peter, James, John and Andrew. The explicit extension of the exhortation to watch to a wider circle, which Mark undoubtedly understood to include the Christians of Rome, suggests that it was Jesus’ intention to transcend any distinction between the disciples, to whom he delegated his authority (see on Ch. 6:7), and the Church at large. That which is primarily the duty of the disciple is secondarily the responsibility of the entire community. Each member has “his work” and by completing it he fulfills the obligation to watch. Vigilance is the responsibility of every believer and provides the sole guarantee of preparedness for the Lord’s return.

The imperative “take heed, be vigilant” in verse 33 and the related call to “watch” in verses 35, 37 furnish a climax to the exhortations of verses 5, 9, and 23. The stress upon vigilance sustained throughout the discourse suggests that the final call to watchfulness in verse 37 is not focused exclusively upon the last day, but like the previous admonitions, has bearing upon the continuing life of the Church during an age marked by false teachers, persecution and delay in the Lord’s return. The

phrase “to each his work” in verse 34 tends to strengthen this conclusion. When verses 33–37 are seen in the context of the entire discourse, it is evident that the vigilance of the Church may have as much reference to the perils from within and without delineated in verses 5–23 as to the climactic event of the parousia in verses 24–27. The time of the appearing of the Son of Man in glory is unknown, but the fact that he will come is certain. The Church is called to live vigilantly in the certainty of that coming.

Reflections – PHEME PERKINS

“On the one hand, Mark underscores the certainty of Jesus’ word. Readers know that the death of Jesus on the cross does not end the story of salvation. On the other hand, Christians need not concern themselves with apocalyptic speculation. Disciples should remember that ‘doing the will of God’ (3:35) has no relationship to the timing of divine judgment. Neither should Christians concern themselves with the fate of those who persecute them or who reject the gospel. When Christians rush to judge others, they should remember this exhortation. The only question the master will ask is whether the servants have been faithful to their call as disciples.

“Living some two millennia after these words were spoken, many Christians today assume that the word about watchfulness has no significance for them. Yet we all know that human life is fleeting. A young man was murdered on the streets of a large city merely for asking some youths why they were verbally tormenting an elderly man. The young man’s fiancée discovers that her whole world has dissolved. Fortunately, the last words they had exchanged concerned love and their hopes for the future. A young woman went to pick up her infant from his nap and discovered that he had died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Unfortunately, V 8, p 695 her last interaction with the baby had been one of anger and frustration over the child’s fussing and crying. Both women are in terrible pain. They have been stripped of what they love most in the whole world. But the young mother has to face the nagging regret that she did not show her baby the love she feels for him in the last hours she spent with him. On a personal level, such stories remind us that we should be watchful as Christians. The early religious orders practiced a time of examining one’s conscience, in which all members assessed how their behavior of the day just past reflected (or neglected) the conduct expected of members of their order. Being a faithful Christian does not just ‘happen’ like crabgrass or dandelions popping up in the lawn. It requires the care, attention, and cultivation of an expert gardener.”

Notes

none

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