

Year B

Mark 13:24-37

I lived for almost fifteen years right next to the Glasgow Central to East Kilbride railway line. When I first moved into the house I can remember the noise of the trains passing every half hour or so. It was especially noisy when the train was pulling away from Giffnock station up the hill past the house. But you know, it wasn't long before I got so used to it that I didn't notice it any longer. How many people have said to you, "how can you live in Lossiemouth with the sound of

the jets?” “How do you stick it?” We all know that after a while we tend not to notice them, most of the time. Human beings have an incredible capacity to adjust to surroundings to the extent that we can fail to notice something that would be strikingly obvious to a visitor.

Advent is the visitor that comes to us every year to remind us how things really are. Advent arrives as a wake-up call; a call to get ready for a big event. Now, you might think that I need a wake-up call to what you've all been put through for what seems like months now. I was looking back at my notes

for last year's Advent Sunday sermon and I began then by drawing your attention to a Daily Mail article headline:

“There may still be 146 sleeps to go until Christmas, but that hasn't stopped Selfridges from launching its festive range a staggering four months early.”¹ That was last year. I think it was even earlier this year! Is there anyone that needs to be woken up to the fact that Christmas is coming and that there is an endless list of things that needs to be done in the next few weeks if we're going to have a successful Christmas

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3718027/Selfridges-opens-Christmas-shop-London-FOUR-months-early.html>

celebration? Many of us are over-caffeinated, running about as if there aren't enough hours in the day, and we're being pushed on by all the hype and commercialisation that makes Christmas special. Do we really need a wake-up call? Well, yes we do! We've been living so near to the railway line for so long now that we don't hear the roar of the trains as they speed past. We hear all sorts of other noise that our culture is pumping out but it's doing nothing more than confusing us and wearing us out. We are in danger of being asleep to what really matters and so the call of this

alarming Gospel text needs to be heard again. The text in Mark's Gospel we are looking at today has been called 'the little Apocalypse'. It doesn't make for comfortable reading, does it? It has the potential to alarm us and upset us and that is good because that's the intention.

So what is an apocalypse? Its root is a Greek word meaning, 'uncovering'. It refers to the disclosure of something that is hidden. It is a revelation of a reality that is evident in heaven and will be made evident on earth. There are a number of apocalyptic writings in the Bible ranging from the large books of

Ezekiel and Revelation down to just a few verses like the reading in Mark's Gospel today. There are lots of different contexts in which apocalypses were delivered but apocalypse itself as a genre of writing has common denominators which characterise all apocalyptic literature. There are three characteristics of all apocalyptic literature, the 'little apocalypse' included. I would like to point these characteristics out to you today. The first is the use of dualism: a contrast between two quite distinct entities. There is a battle ongoing between two superpowers; between good and evil and we

are all caught up in that battle. We are not merely spectators, we are active participants. The season of Advent is in competition with the modern cult of Christmas. There's a battle going on for your attention and for your soul. Is the Advent message going to survive the secular Christmas avalanche? Jesus spoke of the sun and the moon being darkened, of stars falling from heaven, of heavenly powers being shaken. There is a major battle taking place and isn't it remarkable that most of the world is deaf to the racket that it's causing. The second characteristic of the apocalypse is

pessimism. No-one feels particularly elated after reading this type of writing because it always speaks of tough times and experiences. Times are tough and you need to be prepared to live through the pain of that. We don't like pain and discomfort at all and so our culture tries its utmost to eradicate it and at this time of year that manifests itself in a mass spending spree that is guaranteed to drive out despair. Of course, all it does is postpone the despair until the credit card bill arrives in January! And that brings us to our final characteristic of apocalyptic writing which is imminence.

There is no time to go off and ignore all of this because we are being faced with it now. There is an urgency about it all. As I was putting my initial thoughts for this sermon down on paper in mid-October the UK and Ireland was bracing itself for hurricane Ophelia and as I looked outside it was getting awfully dark at two o'clock in the afternoon and what light there was was turning a strange yellowish kind of colour. The ancients might have believed that this was a warning that the Gods were not happy and that would have been confirmed by winds and floods and trees coming down.

We know that it's caused by Saharan sand and Portuguese wild fire smoke. But its effect is classically apocalyptic. You had better make preparations now for there is not time to wait. Dualism, pessimism and imminence: these are the dominant themes and once again we are confronted with them on the first Sunday in Advent as shoppers not so far away from us are bathed in a tinsel glow with sounds of jingle bells and dear knows what else. Both contrasting narratives can claim to be appropriate; both however cannot be right. The challenge today is for all of us to agree together that

Jesus Christ will appear again. That as the ancients awaited his birth so we await his re-appearance and as we do so we take on the forces of evil, we acknowledge that times are tough and we get ourselves ready, for change is imminent. Nothing could stand in greater contrast to the message of our long, western, commercialised Christmas season.

A New York City businessman decided to avoid a \$20 service charge by replacing a fluorescent light himself. After he had smuggled a new light into his office and put it in place, he decided to get rid of the old tube by throwing it in the trash can near his

subway stop. That night he got on the subway holding the seven-foot light vertically, with one end resting on the floor of the car. As the train became more crowded other passengers took hold of the tube, assuming it was a stanchion. By the time the man reached his stop, he simply removed his hand and exited the car, leaving the other passengers gripping the fluorescent tube!²

Isn't it amazing what we can fail to notice? We become de-sensitised to the obvious and our behaviour is so easily influenced by what has no foundation in reality. Jesus said;

² Today in the Word, June 24, 1992

“keep awake”. We hear his warning today so let’s endeavour to attune our ears again to the reality of his promise and not the mirage which this world offers. Amen.