

Mark 13.24-37

"But in those days, following that distress, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; ²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'^[a]

²⁶ "At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸ "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it^[a] is near, right at the door. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³² "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert^[a]! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

In an Advent mood

Firstly, Happy New Year everyone! It's a new church year, so should we think about our resolutions now?

A few weeks ago, as a family we went to Helmingham Hall to see their Garden Christmas lights trail. The thousands of lights around the garden trail were magical and beautiful, and created that positive mood that light in the darkness makes. Early in the trail we went through wardrobe doors, and a little further on there was a lion, and that hint of Narnia itself added to the mood, along with mood music that was playing from speakers around the garden.

That was the kind of *mood* that they created. At other times, at home perhaps we may be in the mood for a comedy film or something more serious. We might be in a reflective mood. The music or television we watch can shape our mood, and the choice of what we listen to or watch is down to the mood we're in. The other day I was in a very *grumpy mood*, but Sarah and the boys understood why I was grumpy, tolerated my grumpiness and turned me around. They changed my mood over the course of a day.

Now it is advent, children are thoroughly in the mood for Christmas. There are only a few weeks of schooling before a well deserved break— and there are wish-lists for Santa to write, and carols to sing, and trees to put up. But more than these things, there is a mood of collective expectation: of a good time, of joy and laughter. There is hope, and sometimes we see this showing itself in less selfish behaviour! More mucking in, and playing nicely.

Adults change their mood around Advent and Christmas too. Sometimes, with a sigh we begrudge the commercialisation of Christmas, and the mess that a tree creates (especially the real ones). Sometimes it's the despair of wondering what to get Aunt Lavinia, and whether she'll be grateful... But we do so love gathering together, giving presents and opening them — we do so love the Christmas drinks (if they happen), and the way that a traditional meal not only tastes fantastic, but also reminds us of previous years. For me part of the mood involves

memories of going to my grandparents when I was a child and getting a cricket bat for Christmas, and freezing at night because that room was *so cold*.

For some of us it will be a blue Christmas — we're going to miss someone really close. Often our blueness is because those previous times really were so good.

I've gone on about mood because I think that mood *changes who we are*. Christmas doesn't happen to us individually, but collectively. We make it, and it makes us. The mood shapes us, and we shape the mood, and when it's a Christmas mood, I think it usually makes us better people.

I think mood and culture are closely related. Mood is a relatively short-lived thing — you're in a good mood, you're in a bad mood, you listen to mood music and it finishes after forty minutes. Culture is a more enduring thing — but how did it get that way? You might describe nations as having a dour culture, or a romantic culture, a culture of efficiency, or thrift, or open emotions or reservedness. But that too gets shifted by the prevailing mood, a bit like the way our weather is shaped by the gulf stream, our latitude, and the seasons (that's like culture), but also by passing storms and high pressure areas (that's mood).

My question though, is whether we can *permanently* change the culture, and whether we can do so for the better? In Mark 13, Jesus changes the mood — speaking 'out of character' and doing an impression of certain types of prophet by changing his speaking style. He gives warnings but also hope. He promises that the Son of Man will come on the clouds in glory — which is to say that he will return after his death, resurrection and ascension. He will return and there will be change. He is telling this to people who absolutely desire and need change to happen. There is no question that this change is the greatest good they can imagine. He tells them that they are going to see hints of this change even in their lifetimes. But he also says not to give up on that hope — stay alert, as if you were anxious about burglars — be alert and maintain that hopefulness.

What Jesus says changes the mood of his followers, and of Christians to come. That could sound trivial — as if he were a clown. But it goes much deeper. Jesus gives us a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven — be it in this discourse on the Mount of Olives, or throughout the rest of his teaching, preaching and ministry. Jesus gives us hopefulness, and a pattern of the kingdom of heaven. Advent may be rife with materialism, but it is also rife with goodwill, generosity, and joy. Advent and Christmas see not only the mood, but also the culture of the Kingdom of Heaven breaking into the ordinary for a month or six weeks. Not all of it, not everywhere, but some. Wonderfully, it shapes not only those who are fully conscious of the meaning of Christmas, but also those who are not — in just the same way that penicillin 'works' whether you understand why or not. Your celebrating Advent and Christmas may be a small act, but you are helping to change the world.

Church tradition says that Advent should be a period of serious contemplation — even fasting. But the anticipation of Christmas also brings out a rash of partying, eating and joy. I think, happily, we can have our cake and eat it! Serious contemplation and study *should bring joy*. Deep prayer, yearning that Christ's kingdom comes, can happily meet with celebrations that Jesus *did* come, born as a baby one night in Bethlehem.

I wish you all joy and wonder, this advent.

Amen.

SDG.