

**Sermon: 2020/11/29 (1st Sunday in Advent, Year B) -
*Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7,16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9;
Mark 13:24-37_BTR***

"Alpha III"

Many years ago - when I was young, I was given a toy rocket by my parents. It may have been a gift for Christmas or perhaps for my birthday, (which is in January, by the way, on the 28th if you want to just take a moment to make a note of that in your diaries).

But what I *do* remember *very* clearly, is that this "toy rocket" was bought from the most famous toy-shop in the world: "*Hamley's*."

Hamley's in London.

It's on Regent Street.

Just a short walk from the Oxford Circus Tube Station.

It is, for kids, a *magical* wonderland.

Seven elegant, Willy Wonka-esque floors of every imaginable game, gadget and gizmo under the sun.

I was probably eleven or twelve at the time.

Now, this "toy rocket" actually *flew*.

Or at least, it was *supposed* to.

It was bright orange, and shaped like a long bullet.

And you assembled it "from scratch."

You literally had to glue and screw its various parts together.

There was a parachute that had to be precisely folded, which went in the nose-cone.

It had little fins for guidance on the tail.

A "control module" with count-down timer.

A launch pad.

Solid "bricks" of fuel that went in the bottom.

There were goggles and gloves in the box.

It had warning-labels about needing parental supervision:

big yellow and black stickers about the danger of being burned and so on.

It was, in other words, a small boy's *dream*,

and I was positively *giddy* with excitement.

I mean, this was the "*real* deal."

Forget water-bottles and foot-pumps.

Or vinegar and baking-soda.

This thing was capable of flying 1,200 feet straight up into the atmosphere;

capable, claimed the manufacturers, of velocities as fast as 250mph.
This was, in other words, no ordinary "toy rocket": *this* was the "Alpha III."

So, what did I do?

I began to build, of course!

There were *loads* of bits, and the instruction booklet was pages and pages of boring small font.

Eventually, however, it was ready...

and out into the yard I went:

I connected all the cords and the wiring.

Hooked up the heavy 9-volt "lantern" battery, which would deliver the ignition spark,

sat down on the grass cross-legged, put the goggles on my face, and pushed the big. Red. Button. [Pause.]

Nothing.

Nothing happened.

It *looked* fantastic, mind - the *Alpha III*:

sitting in the sunshine; *gleaming*.

Pointing up, at the sky like a warrior's spear.

But no flames, no bang and *no* "whoosh."

Why didn't my rocket fly?!

What was wrong?

I mean, it had such an awesome name!

Well, thinking about this disheartening episode from my childhood for which I probably need some therapy, I "Google-d" the maker - who is still in business - to see what they had to say, and I found the following caveat (on their website about my particular model) - I quote - no joke: 'This kit includes a decent rocket as well as almost everything else you will need to make it fly.' [n.1]

'[A]lmost everything else you need to make it fly'.

Almost.

Which now makes sense, when I look back:

there had been a *lot* of "steps" in the instruction manual which described doing things to the rocket which I hadn't, in fact, done to my rocket.

But I figured, the rocket *seemed* good to go.

I wasn't aware at the time of it *obviously* needing anything extra, so I *assumed* that what I was looking at was probably fine;

I assumed that the rocket would just do as I thought it would.

Which brings me to the gospel reading this morning from *Mark*, chapter thirteen:

Mark - the author, a close friend of Peter's - is offering us here an abbreviated version of what we've heard from *Matthew* in previous weeks, and what I've said about context, then, "in previous weeks," applies here also:

Which is to say that what we heard was part of a bloc of teaching shared with the Apostles by Jesus in response to the shock and the disbelief that they had expressed about His prediction that Herod's magnificent, *massive* Temple (in Jerusalem) would soon be utterly destroyed.

They had visited it together - Jesus and "The Twelve," and were now sitting on the Mount of Olives viewing it in the distance across the valley.

Mark, as is typical, chooses to omit a lot of the material that we find in the other gospels.

He is, remember, always in a hurry to get to the climax (of the book); *the purpose* of Jesus' ministry - to the Cross.

Anyway, what he *does* preserve; what he *does* share in common with *Matthew*, in this instance, is *very* significant:

he includes the *exact* same ominous sentences about the 'sun being darkened'; about "shaking" in Heaven;

and the same 'veritable jigsaw of quotations from the apocalyptic books of the Old Testament' in regard to 'the Son of Man': [n.2].

(Some *Isaiah*; some *Daniel*, etcetera, etcetera.)

And it would be easy to tell you that this *whole* paragraph [gesture to the insert] - *all* thirteen verses - is *unambiguously* about "The Second Coming" and the "Day of Judgement."

And, glancing down at your insert, you might say to yourself:

"Yup, that looks good to me."

(That interpretation seems solid.)

Like my "toy rocket."

It *really* looked like it would fly.

But let me tell you that to say that this paragraph we're offered from *Mark* is, *in its entirety*, about when Jesus returns won't "fly" either.

That exegesis collapses when we look at the original Greek.

Look at the insert with me.

Count down to the *ninth* line: this is verse thirty-two.

And look at the words: 'But about that day...'

This is a *contentious* translation.

One that obscures the fact that here Jesus *actually* starts a brand *new* direction in the discussion.

The phrase *launches* a *different* topic.

And you might, if you have a pen or a pencil to hand, make a small dark smudge immediately behind it, to divide our text into two *halves*:

[Do so. And show to camera/congregation].

And we need to handle each "half" separately to comprehend them properly.

In the first *half* - before the "smudge," Jesus invites His friends to contemplate a 'fig tree'.

And He observes to them how one can predict what season of the year it is by

examining the plant:

if it has no leaves, then it must be winter.

If it has begun to bud, then Spring is on the way.

If it is laden with fruit, then it is harvest-time and Autumn.

Easy!

And, in similar, fashion, He tells the Apostles that they will be able to see *obvious* evidence for when 'these things' they are discussing '[are] near'.

That is, the Temple's destruction.

And sure enough that dreadful event didn't happen "in a vacuum."

It wasn't like, one morning, the people of (ancient) Palestine woke up to find their most beloved moment - the sacred "navel" of the universe - had been vandalized and desecrated beyond repair.

There was a "chain" of events - of poor decisions and violence by the Jews - that spiralled out-of-control and culminated in the tragedy.

And we *know* He can't be speaking about the *Final* 'things' - the *very* last day of earth, because He goes on to add that 'this generation will not pass away until' it has 'taken place.'

Which was, I've said before, in 70 AD.

By then, at the height of the Jewish Revolt against Rome, some of Jesus' disciples hadn't been martyred yet. They had *not* 'passed away'.

But every one of them - and every one of their compatriots and peers and neighbors - will have *absolutely* perished before Christ gets back because, after all, it is now 2020 AD and He's still waiting in Heaven.

(Though perhaps Biden's election might precipitate His intervention - that's joke, by the way. - that's a joke)

Of course, thinking that Jesus was speaking *throughout* the text in hand about "The (*true*) End," we will likely have thought that the imagery He volunteers about this matter - the darkened sky; the shaking in Heaven - was a literal description of something fittingly supernatural.

Something otherworldly.

But rather what God had showed the prophets who foresaw these phenomena - the prophets that Jesus draws on this passage - was something more mundane: The darkened sky was almost certainly a vision of the enormous cloud of smoke caused by the fires that the Romans lit when they pillaged and ravaged Jerusalem; the fires of the Temple when it was burned.

And the shaking in Heaven was a reference to the shaking with rage that the angels felt; their revulsion that the Jewish people had caused such a terrible thing to happen by their foolhardy uprising.

But what about *after* "the smudge"?

Well, *then*, in the second "half," as I've indicated, Jesus embarks on a *new* line of

warning about a *separate* event that He tells us does *not* have clear 'signs' *unlike* what would happen to the Temple: and here we must, as I said we would need to, consider the Greek for 'But about *that* day', which is "Περὶ δὲ τῆς ἡμέρας...". [*Peri de tais hémeras*"]

A better rendering would be "*Now of The Day*." (Capital "t" and capital "d.")

That is, the *ultimate* "day."

Armageddon.

'[A]bout' *this* topic 'no one knows', Jesus says.

Not even Him.

When this would eventually occur.

And, since this is the case, 'be on watch'.

'[K]eep awake'.

He doesn't mean drink lots of caffeine.

He doesn't mean we ought to drink energy drinks and take medication.

Rather, what Jesus was foreseeing was that there was going to be a very *long* stretch of time in which events that *seemed*, to the Church, to be "apocalyptic" would occur, but these events would not *in fact* be *actual* "signs of the End."

Because The *true* End, He stresses elsewhere, would be sudden - 'like a thief in the night' [*Mt. 24:43*]; *and*, when it did eventually occur, *it would be unmistakable* - there'd be no need for guessing or to decipher clues:

Just check out *Revelation* 19 (and its description of the 'white rider' - *Christ* - leading a cavalry charge of 'the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen': [*v.11-14*]).

But the fact that there *would* be a *loong(!)* interval - between 'things' that *seemed*, for lack of a better expression, "End-timey" such as the Temple's destruction - and the genuine conclusion of creation, Christians might be lulled into a sort of spiritual stupor;

into a general complacency about the demands of discipleship.

A complacency - you might say, incredulity - that Jesus would ever make His triumphal reappearance.

That there might be a relaxing of standards;

a "relaxing" of morality;

a "relaxing" of *zeal* in His followers.

And isn't that *exactly* what we see all around us?

Isn't that *exactly* what I see in myself? (Yes.)

But here the Savior is trying to protect us against that happening.

His (twice) repeated aforementioned exhortation to "Keep awake!" is a rallying cry that we should live your lives in a *constant* state of enthusiasm for the Kingdom.

"Don't just sit on a launchpad of laziness," He's saying.

"*Take off!* In your discipleship," He urges;

be *ambitious* about what you might do for the spread of the "Good News."

"Shoot" *high* in self-sacrifice and self-denial this Advent.

Be a rocket of holiness.

Footnotes:

1. See: <https://bestreviews.com/best-estes-model-rocket-kits>
2. Cole, R. Alan (2008), *Mark (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Volume II)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 286