Spirituality
Scripture for Life



(Unsplash/Tim Hufner)



by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 27, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

One of the more delightful cartoons I've seen lately shows a puzzled man standing in a secondhand store looking at a display of antique "The end is near" signs.

Religious traditions that believe that history is headed toward a destiny generally assume that the world will end; some think they can unravel signs of its coming — usually in the near future and to the detriment of their adversaries. Paul and his communities expected Christ to return in glory before most of them died. This helps us interpret much of his teaching, including his advice that it is better not to marry. Why start a family if the second coming is right around the bend? As time went on (and on and on), Christian communities began to adjust their expectations. The writing of the Gospels was one result of their adjustment; the written narrative assured that future generations could know Jesus as his companions did.

The early communities had to reorient their spirituality as they accepted the fact that Christ was not about to appear to judge the nations. They began to understand that Christ remained present to them and that they had a much larger and longer mission than they had expected. Paul was already moving in this direction when he called his community to be the body of Christ for their world (1 Corinthians 12).

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 28, 2024

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 95
1 Corinthians 7:32-35
Mark 1:21-28

This takes us from expectations of the end into the realm of prophecy — which is not a foretelling of the future, but a reading of God's influence and desires for the here and now. In our reading from Deuteronomy, Moses promises the people that God will not abandon them, but rather continue to speak to them through prophets. As the early Christians discovered, the promise of prophets did not end with Jesus; just as his mission would continue, so too would prophecy. The belief that God continues to speak through prophets underlines today's psalm refrain: "If today you hear God's

voice, harden not your hearts." This call remains as appropriate today as it was from the times of Moses through Jesus.

That sounds nice and easy, but in reality, it is neither.

Discerning God's action and desires requires us to be deeply grounded in tradition and profoundly open to the new. This is obvious from today's Gospel. Mark depicts Jesus in a whirlwind of activity: teaching (Mark gives us no additional content), healing and battling demons. Curiously, rather than being brought to faith, the people who saw and heard Jesus ended up utterly confused. The least confused were actually his enemies — they understood what was at stake for them.

In today's Gospel, Mark repeats two key ideas: the people were "astonished" or "amazed," and Jesus taught with authority.

What does their bewilderment tell us? First, it makes it clear that Jesus was not what they expected. The folks in question had gone to listen to a teacher. This was hardly the first time they had heard someone preach in their synagogue. (In the days before the NBA, Hollywood and social media, gathering to listen to a sermon was a form of entertainment as well as a religious activity.)

Advertisement

What Jesus' audience heard left them like children who had tasted only watery vanilla ice cream being taken to a Baskin Robbins; there was so much there that they couldn't take it in. The only way people could explain it was to say that Jesus taught with authority, an authority that he authenticated in a successful skirmish with a demon. People saw that Jesus' word was sufficient to banish an unclean spirit. To citizens of an occupied nation, people who had learned to endure their lot in life, who had grown accustomed to mediocre hopes, Jesus came at them like a thunderstorm in the desert, jolting them out of their tedium.

Having never expected anything like this, most people had no idea how to respond. Some were frightened, others threatened. But to those who would follow him, Jesus offered an amazing new take on life. He rooted his message in their traditions, yet, rather than close the book saying, "That's all folks!" Jesus spurred them to hope that all the promises of old would come true — in ways so new that they would continually be astounded.

Mark wastes no time as he throws us into the middle of a world turning inside out. He shows us that bewilderment is good for faith; it can startle us into suspecting that there's more afoot than we would ever dream of.

The end he wants us to see coming near is the end of low expectations — because the reign of God is at hand.

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 19-Feb 1, 2024** print issue under the headline: Great expectations.