Advent and Gethsemane: Mark's Call to Watch

Ian Stockton

What have Advent Sunday and Holy Week in common? Which theological motif is present in Gospel readings both for Advent and Passiontide? In both Mark's eschatological discourse and in his story of Gethsemane there is a repeated call to watch. The present imperative '*gregoreite*' (keep awake, be watchful) occurs twice within a comparatively short section of the Gospel in 13.35,37 and 14.34,38, and the same verb is used also at 13.34 and 14.37. This repeated charge to watch seems to be a deliberate part of the evangelist's theological design. Mark's repetition here is often not noticed because of our usual practice of reading such short sections of text. Yet the evangelist's narrative sequence may become for us a rich spiritual resource, not only on Advent Sunday and in Holy Week, but throughout the year, if we are attentive to his textual repetition in these chapters.

Just before the beginning of the Passion narrative (14.1), Mark concludes the preceding eschatological discourse (13.1–37), with the sayings of 33–37,

> 33 " Beware, keep alert (*agrupneite*); for you do not know when the time will come.
> 34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his own work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch (*gregore*).
> 35 Therefore, keep awake (*gregoreite*), for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,
> 36 Or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.
> 37 And what I say to you I say to you all. Keep awake (*gregoreite*)."[1]

Matthew's more extensive eschatological discourse (Matthew 24-25), with its associated parables of the Wise and Foolish Girls, the Talents, and the Sheep and the Goats, includes two sayings similar to the Markan texts of 13.33 and 13.35, where Matthew relates the call to keep alert (*gregoreite*) to not knowing the day of the lord's coming (24.42) nor the day nor the hour (25.13). Matthew, however, has no equivalent of Mark's

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concluding call to alertness, "And what I say to you I say to all: keep awake." Luke, although using much common material in 21.1-36, does not have equivalent sayings to Mark 13.33 and 35, but does have a general call to watchfulness, "be alert (*agrupneite*) at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21.36). Yet somehow at this point Matthew and Luke, in arranging their received material differently, lack the narrative concentration and dynamism of Mark's more naive approach. Mark's concluding saying prior to the story of Jesus' Passion addresses not only Peter, James, John and Andrew (13.3), and all the disciples, but also anyone who subsequently hears the Gospel. This final saying of 13.35, which is most likely a Markan editorial comment, stands baldly, prominently and immediately before the Passion narrative, "And what I say to you I say to you all: keep awake."

Mark sets his eschatological sequence, with its double reference to the fall of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of man, within the context of Jesus' Jerusalem ministry. This pattern is followed by both Matthew and Luke. All three synoptic gospels offer an eschatological context for the final conflict, as their narratives enter more deeply into the story of Jesus' trial and tribulation, imminent suffering and death, and in Mark particularly, the cost and failure of discipleship.

From Chapter 13 Mark's story soon reaches Gethsemane, after the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, the actions of Judas, the preparations for the Passover meal, and the Last Supper (14. 1-25). Matthew follows Mark here, and both Matthew and Luke are only a few verses longer in reaching Gethsemane. Clearly the Gospel writers express a common sequence here, whether that pattern originated in Mark or earlier. It may be that the eschatological compendia of sayings in all three gospels reflect an emphasis in Jesus' teaching that became more prominent in the final period of his ministry in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it is Mark who makes the much clearer narrative link between being alert for the parousia and the need for watchfulness in Gethsemane

Mark's story does need to be heard for itself, whatever conclusions we may draw about Matthew and Luke and their sayings about keeping awake. In Mark's Gospel, after Jesus' call to his hearers to be watchful and alert (*blepete, agrupneite*), 13.33, there follow the sayings of the parable of the man going on a journey who commands the doorkeeper to watch (*gregore*), 13.34, the summons to watch (*gregoreite*) because the master's time of coming is unknown 13.35, the dangers of falling asleep, 13.36, and the general call to all disciples/ hearers/readers to watch (*gregoreite*), 13.37. Then less than half way through the next chapter the evangelist returns in Gethsemane to the same theme. Could the story have

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been told in any other way? Why were these two traditions of watching put together in such close proximity?

We find in Mark's Gethsemane narrative strong echoes of the words found in the previous chapter. In Mark's story when Jesus reaches Gethsemane he tells his disciples to sit, while he prays. He takes Peter, James and John with him, and he begins to be distressed and agitated.

> 34 And he said to them, " I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and keep awake (*gregoreite*).
> 35 And going on a little further, he threw himself on the ground, and he prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.
> 36 He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want."
> 37 He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake (*gregoresai*) one hour?
> 38 Keep awake (*gregoreite*) and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak."[2]

In the next verses, Jesus goes away and prays, using the same words, and comes back to find his closest disciples asleep again. Then he returns a third time to discover them slumbering yet again. Now it is plain that the hour has come, and that the Son of man is betrayed, (Mark 14.39-42).

The verbal connections between the two passages from Mark 13 and 14 would have been heard more clearly by the first hearers of the Gospel than we who hear the text so much in pieces, in the short liturgical sections of the churches' lectionaries. Perhaps there are new connections that we need to be making between Advent and Gethsemane? What sort of watching does Mark expect of his readers? So soon after the call to all disciples is emphasised (13.37), Jesus' closest followers fail to stay awake, after having been told to watch (14.34-42). Is there something here for us to be hearing, an interpretative and practical connection to be made? Perhaps for twenty-first century readers there is here a resource for faith, understanding and spirituality that is most poignantly and powerfully expressed by Mark?

Hearers who have heard the summons to alertness in the light of the parousia of the Son of man, continue with the story to find that the most prominent disciples fail to stay awake at the approach of Jesus' Passion. Here as elsewhere (4.35-41; 8.14-21; 10.35-45; 14.50.) Mark portrays the fallibility and weakness of Jesus' earliest followers. So often they are lacking in faith, misunderstand Jesus' mission, and seek to avoid the way of the cross. When watching is required they let down their leader when he enters the agony of Gethsemane. In the end all forsake him and flee from the scene of his arrest.[3]

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It is likely that by the time that Mark's Gospel was written, whether shortly before or after 70CE,[4] there was less expectation of an imminent parousia than earlier, or at least some coming to terms with the delay in fulfilment. In Mark's Gospel Jerusalem is a place of crisis, and the eschatological teachings of Jesus, which remained important for the evangelist and his readers, are positioned as a dramatic pause between Jesus' public teaching and the events of the Passion. It is three of the four disciples who ask him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (13.4), who fail the test of alertness in Gethsemane. It has often been thought that the first readers of the Gospel were facing persecution, or were in imminent danger of suffering for their faith. Mark's Gospel was a spiritual resource for the trial of faith, and the disciples' failure at the hour of trial provides ironic comfort for those who struggle in following and watching. The Gospel narrative in its incompleteness invites us to enter into the story, to hear the call to "follow me," and if need be suffer.[5] The call to all, even to us, is to follow and to be watchful.

Can it be that in the earliest and most radical of the gospels the evangelist is interpreting deliberately the sayings of 13.1-37 in the light of the tradition of Gethsemane? Is the Advent call of the earlier section of the Gospel to be understood in the light of Christ's Passion and the disciples' failure to be watchful? In this reading of Mark's story the call to watchfulness includes not only preparedness for the parousia, but also a readiness to endure with Christ in his suffering. On the day after the failed plot against Hitler's life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failure, experiences and perplexities. In doing so we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane."[6]

The final sayings of 13.35-37 point forward to the events of the Passion. "Therefore keep awake (*gregoreite*) – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly." In three of these Roman watches of the night Lightfoot recognised phrases that are echoed in the events of the Passion (14.34, 37f, 40,41).[7] Hooker comments, "the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion take place in the evening (the Last Supper), in the middle of the night (Gethsemane, arrest and trial), at cock-crow (Peter's denial) and in the morning (trial before Pilate)".[8] In commenting on the Passion narrative, Brown contends that the language of watching, trial and hour "are to be understood both on a historical level (what happened to Jesus on the last night of his life in Gethsemane with real enemies approaching

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him who would arrest him and have him crucified) and on an eschatological level (the great period of final struggle with evil for the establishment of God's kingdom).[9] He notes that the repetition of 'watch' here brings the Markan usage closer to the eschatological parable of 13.34-37.[10] All this strengthens our understanding of the narrative links between the two calls to watch.

When the crisis came would the disciples be ready? Before the story's final conflict begins a reminder is given to all hearers that the call to watch is for all. The reader discovers again that in Gethsemane the closest of disciples fail through their lack of watchful waiting with Jesus in his agony of spirit.

In Advent our worship and hymnody herald Christ's coming and kingdom. We are summoned to alertness. Sermons characteristically call for readiness for Christ's coming in glory and spiritual preparation for Christmas. Less often is the call to wait related to the world's travail,[11] and to our being with others in their suffering. There is need to bring Gethsemane into Advent, a move which does justice to Mark's creative narrative.[12] Too readily we miss the opportunity of allowing our advent meditations to be addressed by a theology of the cross and the story of Christ's Passion. Recognition of Mark's creative holding together of Jesus' sayings about watching in 13.35-37 and 14.34-38 provides an incentive to reinterpret our Advent watching and discipline. This reading of Mark challenges us to spend more of our Advent days in watching with Christ in his suffering. This approach involves our readiness to be alongside those who suffer, a patient waiting with those denied justice, a generous staying with those in pain, a disciplined spiritual and practical alertness. Mark's repeated double call to watch helps us to re-examine our use of Advent, and to re-address our discipleship.

The question "Could you not watch one hour?" needs to be heard in Advent too! The hour came when the disciples were not ready. "It is enough, the hour has come." (14.41). The first hearers of the Gospel of Mark would have discovered that in the face of Jesus' imminent suffering his closest companions failed to fulfil the universal call to physical and spiritual alertness. Mark's Gospel offers to us the creative opportunity of connecting the Parousia and the Passion, and of renewing the Advent tradition, so that we are alert to the world in which we live, watching with Christ in Gethsemane.[13]

1 *New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford University Press 1994).
2 *New Revised Standard Version.*
3 Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* (Fortress Press 1991), pp. 70-1. Also John Fenton, 'Mark's Gospel — the Oldest and the Best', *Theology* Vol. CIV No. 818 (2001), pp. 83-95.

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4 Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (A & C Black 1991), p. 8.
5 Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* p. 25; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark, A Listener's Guide* (Trinity Press International 2002), p. 100; Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* p. 250.
6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (SCM Press Ltd. 1971), p. 370. This letter was the first to be written after the failure of the July plot against Hitler's life, when Bonhoeffer's own agony of waiting entered a different phase.
7 R H Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of Mark* (Oxford 1950), p.53, which is referred to by Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* p. 324.
8 Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* p.324.
9 Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah, From Gethsemane to the Grave, A Commentary on the Four Gospels,* Volume One, (Geoffrey Chapman 1994), p. 195.
10 Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* p. 196.
11 Romans 8. 18–25.
12 Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man, A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus,* (Orbis Books 1988) pp. 346–348. Myers recognises Mark's deconstruction of the apocalyptic discourse, and sees the call to vigilance as being primarily addressed to the reader, with the discipleship community being exhorted to embrace the world as Gethsemane.
13 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* p. 370.

Advent addendum: further preparations for the Lord

Alain Tschudin

Given that the article "Preparing the Way for the Lord" was published in its unrevised form, it seems necessary to provide some orientation for readers concerning the substantive differences between that draft and the intended final manuscript. Initially, when seeking to describe the relationship between science and religion- specifically between evolution and Christianity- I chose the metaphor of a boxing match, to convey the conflict and tensions that existed between the two camps. As my explicit aim in the article was to promote conciliatory dialogue between the two parties, the "fight" metaphor no longer seemed appropriate and was excised from the revised version. In the printed article, however, fossils from the earlier

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