

THE EMMAUS SERIES

33rd Sunday Year B

Daniels 12:1-3

Hebrews 10:11-14, 18

Mark 13:24-32

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away

The cycle of the Church's year is coming to an end. The 'end of the world' – when God's great plan for creation will be realized – will be one of the themes of the liturgy during the coming weeks. In the time of Jesus, centuries of frustration under occupying powers had given rise among the Jewish people to a form of literature (today called 'apocalyptic') that expressed a confidence that, despite all appearance to the contrary, God's promises – so important in the faith of old Israel – would be fulfilled in 'a new heaven and a new earth'. Some of this literature is included in the Scriptures – the prophecy of Daniel, from which our first reading comes, is an example. This literature has often been misunderstood by 'fundamentalist' interpreters. Its startling images of the passing away of the present world were not intended to *describe* how the end will come; its essential message was an assurance that God's designs *will* be fulfilled, despite all appearances to the contrary. Jesus preached the coming of the final reign of God; it is not surprising, therefore, that he used some of the images and expression of this literature - as he does in today's gospel, the final section of a long passage that gathers together recollections of this teaching of Jesus.

The title, 'Son of Man' – adopted by Jesus as a subtle intimation of his role in the designs of God – comes from the prophecy of Daniel. Coming from God, the 'Son of Man' will fulfill the great destiny of Israel, bringing all the peoples of the world under God's reign (see Dan 7:13-14). The community that gave us Mark's gospel rejoices in the knowledge that the Son of Man has truly come - Israel's hopes have been realized. For the early Christians, this confidence raised challenging questions, that took some time to resolve (see St Paul in 2 Thes ch 2) – if, in the Saviour's Paschal Mystery, God's final achievement in creation has been realized, what are we to make of our life in a world that seems to go on as before? In the face of this problem, today's gospel reflects the outlook of a community that is finding a healthy balance. Though it speaks with certainty of the coming of the end, it acknowledges that 'nobody knows' when it will be fully manifest 'but the Father'. Echoing the language of literature such as the prophecy of Daniel about the signs of the end, it nevertheless urges constant vigilance, lest believers be taken unawares – one of the themes of the preaching of Jesus. We know God's final achievement has been realized in the Christ's risen greatness; but we wait in faith and hope for our full sharing in all that Christ has promised. With Mark's community, we place our trust – whatever lies ahead of us - in the one who said: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away'.

John Thornhill sm