

Gospel Reading *Mark 13:24-37*

Text *Mark 13: 30-31* Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.

### **NEW BEGINNINGS IN CHRIST VS OLD BEGINNINGS IN HUMANKIND**

This is the beginning of a season of hope and joy. And do we ever need it! A quarter million in the U.S. dead from Covid 19, millions unemployed, food banks having to work overtime – the list could go on and on. We have had no food functions in our churches for so long that even the church mice are ordering out! So, bring on the hope and joy – we will take a double serving if you please.

Advent is a good time to look at new beginnings: Beginnings that will be filled with hope and joy if they are in Christ. They will be filled with the usual, if they are rooted only in human kind. We have the Christ ways and the old ways. Let us take a look at what those ways might be.

**Interpersonal lives:** A good place to start is with looking at our interpersonal lives. Psychologists tell us that traumatic and unsettling circumstances tend to make more intense whatever psychological trends we have going in our lives. If love, communications and flexibility are present in a marriage, then those elements will be made even more obvious. On the other hand, if discord, poor communications and behavioral rigidity are present, then those negatives will be accelerated. It is not surprising that domestic violence is in a steep upturn – interestingly enough surveys show that fathers are spending 38% more time with their children and are enjoying the new relationships. Let us operate on the assumption that the latter figure has nothing to do with the first!

During a time of national trauma people frequently explain what is going on by attributing it to human nature. We political scientists tend to encounter human nature arguments frequently. Consequently, I took off from my usual research program and spent a year studying genetics. After reading a huge literature and visiting with researchers in the field, I ended up with the answer to the reality of human nature. The fruit of my research could be summed up in only three words: It all depends. That kind of conclusion wins you no prizes. It produced just one article and my only recognition was from the dean of my college who wondered why I had wasted a year of my effort and several thousand dollars of the colleges' research funds. Fortunately the dean was a professor of English and no one paid any attention to him anyway. It all depends – an unsatisfactory, if accurate, answer to why people take one road and others a different pathway. Why does having children home twenty-four/seven cause domestic violence in some families and renewed bonding and joy in others? It all depends. Why does unemployment send some people into the streets to engage in crime and others into demonstrations and entrepreneurial activity? Well, it all depends. Why do some families under stress disintegrate and end up in divorce court, while others become an even more closely bonded and loving unit? Yes, it all depends.

The question then becomes: Depends on what? To that question I do have an answer: Healthy new beginnings are in Christ. Old beginnings, old ways; may, or may not, produce desirable outcomes to stressful situations. But new beginnings, beginnings rooted in Christ,

always produce healthy interpersonal relationships, whether that is a functioning family, business relations, civic duty or even dealing with a Professor of English.

It is easy, and very tempting, to simply pay lip service to the notion of putting Christ into new interpersonal beginnings. If you looked at my thoughts and public utterances during the last election cycle, you would have been hard put to find any touch of Christ, unless it was Jesus overturning the money changers tables in the Temple! I hope that I can do better with this new beginning in our civic life. To put Christ first in interpersonal relationships one must truly love ones neighbor as one's self. It doesn't have to be the kind of love that leads to agreement, but the kind of love that leads to understanding, forbearance and inclusion.

**Spiritual lives:** Advent is particularly a time to begin anew our spiritual lives. The pandemic makes this period of renewal essential. While we have not been separated from God, we have been separated from the church. Oh, I know that WE are the church. But the building is significant to me, as is the activity that goes on within it. The cup of coffee I sip and the cookies I munch, with other church members in the parish hall, is frequently the closest I get to a community of believers all week long. Is this new beginning, this post pandemic church, going to be an old way beginning, a recovery of the status quo, or is it to be a beginning in Christ? What will this post Covid 19 church be like? I have no idea, except that it will require our heart, our mind, our strength as we love God.

How do we make the Good News available to the whole community? What does membership in the community of believers really mean? What should our worship services look like? Sound like? How do we minister to one another and to the unchurched?

As we look for more questions and a few answers, let us bask in the glow of joy that Advent is here and that the Good News is being made flesh in our very presence! Amen.