

## Isaiah 64: 1-9

### *Introduction*

This week I heard a podcast and was reminded of a parable of Soren Kierkegaard about the end times. The readings, on this first Sunday of advent, are about the second coming, especially the one from Marc, they link well with the parable Kierkegaard tells a parable about a circus. The stage catches fire and the director sends the clown to the nearby village, to warn the villagers. But the more the clown warns them, the more they laugh. 'Isn't that good advertising, we will surely come to visit your show.' They laugh till fire reaches their town and destroys all they have. And Kierkegaard says: That clown's experience is similar to ours: we can warn others, but do they listen? Or do they laugh?

It clearly is God's will to reach all nations. Isaiah 64 : 1-2 says

*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!*

Meaning: it is the will of the Lord to reach all nations, even his enemies. They have to be warned: 'The end is coming! Prepare!'

Are we like the clown in the parable. Are we indeed in the business of warning others? Don't we need a warning ourselves? Isn't Isaiah giving that warning together with the Lord Jesus in the reading from Marc 13?

### **1. The end times**

It seems obvious that we live in the end times. This week, I organized a conference in Spanish for our people in Latin America and tomorrow another one in English for the pastors and church leaders we are in touch with in Asia and Africa. The guide I use is

a small e-book released by Operation World, about being a church and about Mission and the Kingdom in end times.

We live in the midst of a Pandemic. The whole world is affected. Jesus tells about the end of times

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. 9 “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. 10 And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. 11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12 And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.

What we see now, is similar to what Jesus is predicting, connected to his second coming

We hear about Wars, climate events, natural disasters, pandemics, hunger, mental health issues, increasing suicide rates, economical disasters, mass-migration, increasing exclusion from work/study, isolation of elderly and so on.

The thorough study of Operation world mentions 55 areas affected. I mention the four most important

- 1) Globalization is taking a huge hit, for more than one reason. The imposition of travel restrictions is one of the more immediately apparent causes – and effects.
- 2) Digital life is unfolding, even as our physical world closes in on us. There is a lot of upside to this. Families, friends, churches, and organizations are all able to keep interacting with one another – at least in the places where devices and the necessary bandwidth are affordable. We have a wealth of Christian resources available.
- 3) Mental health and related health issues are on the rise. There will almost certainly be a very significant increase in the number of people suffering with mental

health issues. Job losses, economic crises, struggles to cope with the realities of lockdown, domestic (including child) abuse, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety, panic, and depression – all these require compassionate and effective responses.

4) The rich get richer and the rest get left behind. The poor disproportionately suffer from communicable diseases. People get easily infected, and there are more illnesses than before. Young people and children are affected – over 90% of enrolled schoolchildren worldwide are out of the educational system.

When I shared this, a pastor from Ecuador responded saying that due to the crisis, even young children now go back to illegal mining activities, only to survive. And a pastor from Cuba said that hunger and despair are rampant, people live without hope. Heartbreaking

## **2. We are witnessing and helping, right?**

Thankfully, there is us, Christians, and we are witnessing Christ and helping the poor, right?

Maybe we are, but we could do better. We might not feel the urge to share and help as we should. Look at Isaiah. Disasters are from all times. The people of Israel are in exile. I just finished reading the book of Deuteronomy, which ends when the people of Israel are on the edge of the promised land. They were suppressed in Egypt, left and wandered for 40 years through the desert and now stand at the border of the promised land. Moses gives them a recap of what happened and a view of the future: If you obey, you will be blessed and live in peace. If you do not, you will receive punishment (two chapters of punishment) and end up living in a strange country with strange gods suppressed again by a strange nation whose language you do not speak, etc. That is where they are now. And that is where the prophet Isaiah cries out: Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down....

They live in such turmoil, and with so much grief and pain. The people of God, the Israelites, just do not see God at work anymore. They cry out: return! And in chapter 63: why did you harden our hearts, so that we fear you not? Why did you permit us to wander from your ways? There is an estrangement from God. The believers want to follow him, but they are unable to. Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down...

The experience of the believers in Isaiah can be ours. God feels at a distance. It is as if He is not aware of our suffering. In Dutch theology, a professor talked about a divine eclipse.

Like a solar eclipse. We know that God is there, but there is an obscuration of God, a dimming of his presence like a divine eclipse. And we call out to him: rend the heavens! Come down.

Isaiah confesses that they do not deserve God's coming down, descending to us. He says: even our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. That is a descent description of an explicit image: in Hebrew it reads that our deeds are like (literally) a menstruation cloth, like sanitary pads.

The idea of that image is that the love of a man and a wife has not resulted in life. They have been together, but it was fruitless. That is how Isaiah pictures the relation between the believers and God, even the righteous deeds result fruitless in the light of a holy God.

Those are harsh words. But think about it. Have we been the clown from Kierkegaard's parable and warned our neighbors about Christ's second coming? Have we shared the good news with as many people as possible, warning them that what we see clearly forms part of the signs Jesus talks about.

What about our deeds, have we been giving more to the poor and the needy, or do we sort of continue with our consuming lifestyle, spending the money we have (or even borrow) to buy more clothing, more luxury articles, more things that are dead

and missed out on helping our fellow Christians and fellow human beings who are suffering and even starving at this very moment?

Maybe we did something. Maybe we helped and shared the gospel somehow. Even if we did, we sigh with Isaiah that our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

We have not been as fruitful as we should have been and many of our days are spent to please ourselves, and not to please and love God and our neighbor. Oh Lord, that you would rend the heavens and come down to help us!

### **3. Love comes down**

That is what we remember and celebrate in the advent period. Love has come down. The Father has rend the heavens. He did so in Jesus Christ. In his coming, heaven has touched earth. He did so in the outpouring of the holy Spirit, when the earth quaked and tongues of fire appeared in the midst of the disciples.

He keeps on coming down in his Word and in the sacraments in which we celebrate that heaven has rent and that love has come down and that heaven even touches earth today. Yes, we sometimes feel like there is a divine eclipse, yes, we do miss out on seeing God and yes, our best deeds are polluted. But we do have a living hope. The Father himself loves us. He is molding our lives, like the potter is molding the clay. He is working on us, his church, and on each of us individually.

Let God's love change us. Let us look up. Jesus says: when you see all those things, know that the summer is coming. And let us follow Jesus. Let us proclaim the gospel by Word and deed. And that might be a folly. We might be like clowns. Golgotha shows a conflict with the world. Jesus conquers sin, the devil and the world at the cross. There is a hidden wisdom in the event of the crucifixion. Paul writes to the church of Corinth

*We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:23-24*

The Orthodox tradition places Jesus in icons at the cross, with his feet on the head of Satan. The foolishness of the gospel is God's wisdom. Jesus conquers. He is raised from death. And He is coming again.

So let us be clowns. Let us be followers of the God who became man. Let us share our hope of a new heaven and earth. Share that summer is coming. That these signs we see do not mean that God has forgotten us. He is preparing a place for us. Let us keep on serving Him with a living hope, and share the love He has poured out in our words and deeds, and love each other fervently, and our neighbor.

Let us also remind one another of the marvelous fact that we have a living hope. That what we see around us, are signs of the end of times, are signals of Jesus' coming. So that we look up with hope. Summer is coming!!!! Amen.