

(With Starbucks Christmas Coffee Cup)

(Hold up cup) I don't have to say a word and many of you immediately know what this is all about. In case you don't, this is the Starbucks cup for the Christmas season. Apparently some people are very offended that it is a Christmas cup but it contains no overt Christian messages - not even things like love, peace and joy. Their objections have gotten quite a bit of attention - far too much attention in my opinion. Many people, including many faithful Christians are pushing back and saying their objections are nonsense. The thing is, that push back is also getting far too much attention.

Of course the officials at Starbucks aren't losing any sleep over it. It's really just free advertising. And for the record, I'm told that Starbucks recently donated \$750,000 to Lutheran World Relief.

I brought this cup because it sets up the problem for us if we try to use our gospel reading for today. Why did this cup create such a stir? Because it upset someone? Okay, sure. But there is always a fringe to every group. Why did this fringe

get so much attention? Because the media gave it that much attention. Make no mistake, Christian values can be a cash cow. Some media outlets market to specific segments of Christianity. They find loyal followers and generate solid ad revenue. Most major media outlets find that subtly mocking Christianity is also highly profitable, and so they do it.

Can we blame the media for making a big deal about trivial things? No. We can't. News media is audience based. They give the audience what they want to hear. If it's a spicy debate between presidential candidates, that's what you get. If it's a mocking of Christianity, that's what you get. Unfortunately really giving us the information we need to be a truly informed citizenry is not profitable.

When all is said and done, you need to understand that you live in a culture that ultimately takes a quiet delight in trivializing your faith. Why that is so is for a different sermon. It just is. Being a Christian will get you nowhere in our part of the country today, and if you are too overtly faith-filled it will probably hurt you.

What I find many Christians doing is taking a kind of faith-lite approach. They see Christianity as giving a good

ethical code for life, but not to be taken too seriously. When Jesus says sell what you have and give the money to the poor, people just balk at it. If you're at a party and someone starts talking about the end of the world, and God's judgment and damnation it's a source of embarrassment in polite society. On the whole, anyone whose faith causes a radical departure from the cultural norms is considered a freak.

So then, as people who want to faithfully follow Christ, what do we do with texts like our gospel reading where Jesus talks about the destruction of the temple and other apocalyptic things? Here's a dare - if you go out to lunch after worship go ahead and talk loudly in the restaurant about how God is going to cause all this destruction. This is not the stuff that comes up at polite dinner parties in American households today!

And let's make it really weird. In two Sundays we start the season of Advent. Here's the first two verses of the gospel reading for that day, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." (Luke 21:25-26)

That doesn't sound like, "Ho Ho Ho, Merry Christmas!" If Starbucks really wants to be true to Christian beliefs they should put that quote on that Bible quote on their cups!

Before we get into how we should handle things like our gospel reading for today, there's one more thing you need to know. You know well that I like to study scriptures using scientifically critical techniques. I find it is a way to engage them more deeply than the methods we learned as kids; for indeed the Bible is a very deep and sophisticated book.

If you try to date the writing of Mark's gospel with scientific literary methods you can't get an exact date. But you can get close. Most biblical scholars date it in the mid to late 60's of the first century. The other gospels: Matthew, Luke and John were written later, probably in the 80's or 90's. All of them record Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple, which did indeed occur in the year 70. The thing is, with Matthew, Luke and John you could argue that Jesus didn't really predict the destruction of the temple. Instead the authors just put the words in Jesus' mouth and said they came from before the destruction of the temple.

But if the temple is destroyed in the year 70 and Mark is written in the '60's, then when Jesus says of the temple, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down," there's no arguing it is prophesy-after-the-fact.

Several weeks ago we talked about the creation stories in Genesis. I think those texts speak more powerfully if we *don't* insist on reading them as scientifically historical accounts. They were never intended to be read as such. But Mark's gospel is.

Our culture may think that talk of the end of the world is nonsense. They may think religion is an invention of the Bronze Age that smart people should grow up from. Mark's gospel gives our faith reliable historical grounding. It is real. The stark reality is that Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem in pretty good detail well before it happened. Jesus' apocalyptic predictions are still unfolding. And a core part of your faith is looking forward to the end of time when God will bring all things to their completion.

I see two things coming to us from these words of Jesus today. One, we need to take our faith seriously. It is the

core of our lives - not just an ethical framework, or a cultural tradition, or as some people say that the world's religions are all just branches of the same tree.

Either you build your life around the self-giving love of Jesus as the source of your salvation, or you don't. Most Americans today say they believe in God and they think they'll go to heaven after they die. That's a sweet thought. But it's ultimately selfish, it lacks substance, and it won't take you anywhere. Solid faith is built on the historical reality of our Lord.

The second thing this text does is give us a real challenge. If we are to go and make disciples of all nations then I wouldn't suggest starting with Mark 13. It is a reality that you want to live toward as faithful Christians, but not an effective evangelism text. Don't apologize for it and don't be embarrassed by it, but suggest people see the deeper reality it points to. It points to a reality in God's hands that is coming about in God's own time, whether people support it or not. And when it does happen leave the work of salvation up to God. Our role is to be faithful. To trust in God's goodness, and to proclaim without fail the gracious love of our God. Amen