

First Sunday of Advent

“It will seem like all hell has broken loose - sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar, and everyone all over the world in a panic... But when these signs begin to happen, stand tall with your heads held high because your redemption is at hand.

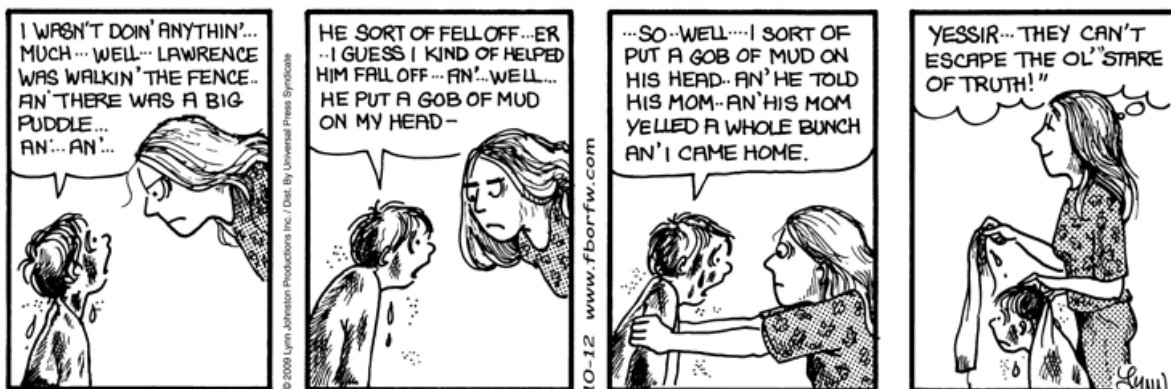
Luke 21, 25-28, 34-36

For centuries, people the world over have gone into a panic at the occurrence of unusual natural phenomena like total eclipses of the sun or moon, shooting stars, earth quakes and volcanic eruptions. This is entirely understandable when one considers the death and destruction caused by geological upheavals. Primitive and ancient peoples and cultures did not have the benefit of discoveries made by the relatively modern sciences of astronomy and geology. While astrologers abounded in the ancient world, their predictions had much more to do with the creation of fear and panic than with offering people reassurance.

Jesus, too, saw the grim side of things. He, too, was aware of the fretful sky-searching that went on and the distress that sometimes resulted in the general population. But for him, the terror that was prevalent was not a prelude to even more terror. That was the difference between him and others. While they anticipated doom, he forecast liberation.

Regrettably, we don't consistently hold firm to Jesus' words of hope. When severe natural disasters occur, we can catch ourselves questioning whether we really believe and trust in a God who is benevolent and caring. And our gloom can become even worse if we are treated meanly by people around us - if a tradesman exploits our trust, if the butcher short changes us, if the Reserve Bank hikes up interest rates. While Jesus overcame depressing events and thoughts by faith, we are not entirely confident of a liberating future and sometimes have to be coaxed and argued out of our depression and misery. Somehow or other, those who shaped the liturgical year realised how easily we can slip into feeling doubtful and miserable. So they assembled an extraordinary set of readings from the Old and New Testaments to demonstrate how God is at work in our world, conveying God's message of hope and liberation through the words of all kinds of weird and wonderful characters, and especially through the words of Jesus who was the one who best captured God's message for humanity. Jesus is God in our skin. We know from experience that we can resonate with and are encouraged by much of what he says and does. We know too that we are also challenged and stretched by him. Advent is the first chapter in the story of how Jesus encourages and challenges us, and it opens today with the announcement of a future of freedom under God. Today's gospel also reminds us how important it is for us to live in faith and hope so that when our day of judgement comes we will not find ourselves trying to hide behind excuses and rationalisations.

For Better or For Worse, a comic strip I came across recently, captures this neatly:



In today's gospel, Luke depicts our final judgement very simply as "standing before the Son of Man". According to Luke, our judgement before Christ will be a moment of illumination when all deception and pretence will melt away, when our excuses and rationalisations will evaporate, when we will know our goodness and face our failures. But rather than make us cower and tremble, the prospect of standing before Jesus should fill us with hope: hope that Jesus, "the shoot of Jesse" referred to in today's first reading from Jeremiah, will come to redeem us despite ourselves; hope that in Jesus, God loves us in both our most Christ-like moments and in our most abysmal failures. Advent paradoxically begins at the end by presenting us with a glimpse of the promised return of Christ at the end of time. In four weeks it telescopes our life span as Christians: living lives of love, compassion, mercy and forgiveness so as to be ready to stand before the Son of Man.