

#TENDER

Tender is probably not the word you associate with the passage from Mark 13 used on the First Sunday of Advent. No, here we find the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus: bold words about the sun being darkened and stars falling from the sky, about the Son of Man coming with great power and glory.

The word “tender” does appear in this passage, but it’s in the context of reading the signs of the times: “As soon as [the fig tree’s] branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.” Jesus isn’t talking about the branch being loving or kindhearted as we usually think when we hear the word “tender.” He’s talking about reading the signs when you see that the branch is sensitive, when it’s delicate to the touch. Jesus certainly sees and understands the signs around him; he knows that he is entering the “time of trial” as Mark says, the “time of darkness” as Luke puts it. Soon will come the betrayal, denials, abandonment, trial, torture, and the cross. This Jesus, who one day will come with great power and glory, is also the one who suffers and weeps and asks his friends to stay awake with him in his time of trial, in his time of darkness.

But even more, this same Jesus who gives glimpses of his power and majesty in overturning the tables of the moneylenders and confounding the self-righteous in their attempts to trip him up is also the one who can read the signs of human pain and need in those who reach out to him. And he responds tenderly.

To the leper in the beginning of Mark’s Gospel who begs Jesus to heal him—“if you choose”—Jesus responds not by showing how powerful he is or by immediately healing him with the snap of a finger but instead by saying, “I do choose.” Jesus touches the man even before he makes him clean. Jesus sees the tenderness of the man’s pain and responds with the tenderness of his loving heart.

To the little children and their desperate parents who approach him to seek a blessing, only to have his disciples shoo them all away as if they are unworthy of his attention, Jesus responds with tender care, even as he is indignant with those who call themselves his followers and yet cannot see the signs of human need.

When we feel weak and overwhelmed, let us hang our hope on the blessed truth that this same Jesus who one day will come with great power and glory is also the one who walks alongside us right now, with tenderness in his heart and balm for our weary souls. Let us echo the words of the old spiritual that says, “When my heart within is aching, Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.”

*-The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry
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