

**Reflection on the Gospel-33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 13:24-32)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

In the opening lines of today's gospel reading, there are clear echoes of two passages from the prophecy of Isaiah. The first passage reads, "For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light" (Isaiah 13:10). These images from Isaiah read like an unravelling of God's work in creation. The second passage likewise predicts a scenario that seems to reverse the Genesis creation account: "All the host of heaven [the constellations] shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree" (Isaiah 34:4). The prophet is using powerful poetic imagery to speak of God's judgment on the people of Israel who have strayed from their covenant relationship.

The parallel images in Mark 13 are referenced to the aftermath of the "time of distress" associated with the destruction of Jerusalem, a time of intense suffering for the community of believers. Jesus tells his disciples that, after all their suffering, strange cosmic phenomena will signal his return in glory and usher in a new age for God's people when the faithful will be gathered in. The message is intended to give comfort and hope to Mark's persecuted community of the late sixties or early seventies of the first century. Just as the new leaves on the fig tree signal the approach of summer, so too will the strange signs in the heavens signal Christ's coming and the onset of a new era, an end to the "time of distress". The message is thus one of encouragement for the community as they face an uncertain future rather than one of judgment.

The strange apocalyptic imagery and the ancient cosmology that has Jesus returning on the clouds need not distract the modern and scientifically sophisticated reader from hearing the call to trust in God no matter what happens. This reading may remind some of us that the unravelling of God's work is more than a poetic image in our times. The freak storms, the cyclones, and other signs of global warming we have seen might well serve as reminders to attend more carefully to the preservation of planet Earth. We may also hear a call to pay closer attention to what the "other-than-human" Earth elements can tell us about God and God's ways.

Tim Winton's memoir, *Island Home*, offers a contemporary reminder of who we are as planetary beings, of what we have done to our planet and of how attentiveness to land and landscape is integral to being who we are. The wild fig or the black-flanked rock wallabies, for instance, may be more eloquent teachers than we had ever realised.