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Sermon

Signs of What Times?

Mark 13:24-31; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

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Introduction

We are now in Advent when we turn our attention to the first and second comings of the Lord. In today's readings the focus is the second coming of Christ.

Do you find the Gospel passage scary or at least uncomfortable? Surely, we all do. This chapter has enough references to decidedly unpleasant events to have anyone worried.

It is quite a complicated passage and frankly it doesn't help to take a magnifying glass to one section when a survey of the whole chapter would help us get things into perspective. So I will take the liberty of skimming over the whole chapter and pointing out some salient features as well to help us make sense of what Jesus is saying. To get the best out of this, you will want to follow it in a Bible either now or later on.

I need to acknowledge that there are different interpretations of this chapter, but this is supported by several commentaries to which I have referred. The passage deals with the destruction of Jerusalem, the second coming and the End of the Age. Are they supposed to be altogether? Is it really about the End Times or all about first century events? Is it both? Do they overlap?

I take it that Jesus is not trying to confuse although the answers may be more complex than we expect.

The Questions

An important starting point is - What question is Jesus answering? The disciples have exclaimed over the magnificence of the temple. At that time it was still being built. To their great astonishment, Jesus says it will all be torn down. This is the glory of their nation, the seat of God.... For this to be destroyed was to them the end of their world.

And so they ask him in verse 4:

"Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

The parallel passage in Matthew¹ has three questions, which may be stated as:

¹ Matthew 24:3

When will the Temple be destroyed? What will be the sign of your coming? What will be the sign of the End of the Age?

This is what he sets out to answer. He does not give them what they want – satisfaction of their curiosity about the timing of the end - but what they need – how to discern the signs of the times so they will not be disheartened by persecution, panicked by wars, fooled by appearances or led astray by false messiahs. He explains that there is a difference between the end of their little world and the end of the Age.

Two of my commentaries highlight an easily overlooked fact. Jesus uses the pointers “this/these” and “that/those.” The Temple was destroyed 1,944 years ago. So obviously, the destruction of the Temple is a separate event from the end of the Age. One is near in time to Jesus speaking, the other further away. What if he consistently used “this” for the time near at hand and “that” for the remote? What if he is using the standard Old Testament expression “that Day” for the Day of Judgement?

<p>Temple & Jerusalem (<i>These things</i>)</p> <p>The Signs</p> <p>5-6 False messiahs 7 Wars <i>Not the End</i> 8 Wars, Earthquakes, Famines <i>Just the beginning of birth pangs</i> 9-13 Persecutions 10 <i>Gospel must first be preached to all nations</i> 14-23 The Abomination Warnings about fall of Jerusalem</p>	<p>Return & End Times (<i>That Day, Those Days</i>)</p>
	<p>Events:</p> <p>24-25 <i>Those Days</i> Heavenly upheaval 26 Second Coming 27 Gathering of the Saints</p>
<p>When?</p> <p>28 Fig tree 29 <i>These things</i> 30 This generation will not pass away until all <i>these things</i> have happened</p>	
	<p>Teaching:</p> <p>31 Heaven & Earth will pass away 32 No one knows <i>That Day</i> 33 You do not know when 34-37 Parable of Doorkeeper: Watch!</p>

Following that line of thinking, the prophecies fall into four groups:

- vv5-23 relating to the Temple;
- vv 24-27 about the Last Day;
- vv 28-30 concerning the Temple again;
- vv31-37 focussing on the Last Day again.

Destruction of the Temple

In verses 5-23 he describes events which all relate to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. He speaks of false messiahs arising (v5-6); of wars – “but this is not the end.” When there are wars, earthquakes & famines (v8) these things are “just the beginning of birth pangs.”

Persecutions will arise (v9-13) but nor is this the end for “the gospel must first be preached to all nations.”

Then he gives a sign: “an abomination that causes desolation standing where it does not belong.” This is understood to have been an idol placed in the Jewish Temple by the Romans. In A.D. 70, the Romans destroyed the Temple and razed Jerusalem to the extent that they plough a furrow across the city. The siege and conquest were times of appalling suffering and brutality. The warning to flee to the mountains is known to have been observed by the Christians in the city who fled before to the city of Pella before it was too late.

Last Days

In verse 24, where our reading started, Jesus turned to the advent of the Son of Man – “In those days (literally) after that distress” What will happen? There will be some disturbance in outer space affecting sun, moon, stars etc. N.T. Wright regards this as simply poetic apocalyptic language meaning one’s world is coming to an end metaphorically. It does occur to me that at the crucifixion the sun was darkened for 3 hours for an unknown reason. People assume it was a solar eclipse. It could not have been since it was the Passover which by definition is at the time of the full moon. You cannot have a solar eclipse at a full moon. So the sun being darkened has happened without the end of the world.

After these astronomical events, the Lord will come with his angels in great power and glory. He will then send the angels to gather in the his chosen ones.

They will be gathered in literally from the four directions from the extremity of earth to the extremity of heaven. The term “heaven” can mean the atmosphere, space or God’s dwelling. So the gathering is comprehensive! Wherever Christians are the angels will gather them to Jesus. Don’t worry that you might be in the wrong place and get left out!

The Fig Tree

In verses 28-30, Jesus speaks of the fig tree and “these signs.” If the logic of the commentators is followed, “these signs” relates to the signs nearer in time to him, that is the signs preceding the destruction of the Temple: wars, rumours of wars, false messiahs etc. He likens them to the leaves appearing on the fig tree and they knew summer was coming. Similarly for us, when you see blossom on the fruit trees or leaves on that oak outside, you know Spring is here and Summer is coming.

If he is referring to the warnings of the destruction of the Temple (which is the main question he was asked), then the reference to “this generation” also makes sense. His generation would live to see the destruction of the Temple about forty years later.

How confident can we be of his accuracy? Either it is true or utterly without foundation but he asserts, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (verse 31). He was right in predicting the destruction of the Temple – it happened 40 years later. Why should he not be right in the final events as well?

Watchfulness

Jesus continues in verse 32, to tell us that no one can predict when “that Day” will occur. You may wonder why he was not clearer about timings. He said quite clearly that he did not know when the Second Coming would occur. He said only the Father knew that. He hadn’t told the angels, he hadn’t told the Son. How could this be? Remember the Son of God had set aside aspects of his divinity in order to live as one of us in a body. He could not be omnipresent. He chose to know only what the Father revealed to him.

We may wonder at the length of time before the end. Peter tells us in his second letter,

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”²

God is being merciful to delay the end, to maximise the number who will be saved. Aren't you glad he did not come before you were saved? I am.

A Christian I knew wrote a book called *The Times of the Signs*. He showed by all sorts of calculations that the second coming would be in 2005. He claimed that when Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour that that didn't mean you couldn't know the year or the month! Well he was wrong! Perhaps the mere fact he had chosen a year, meant it could not be that year, since it will happen when we least expect it.

What Jesus wants us to focus on is our attitude to his return. “³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ... ³⁷ Watch!”

Jesus tells a parable to make the point. A man goes away and leaves his servants looking after his property. The doorman had better stay awake to guard the property and not be found asleep.

When I was a boy we had a wire-haired fox terrier called Gunner. Every evening sometime after 6, Gunner would run to the door and bark. Then without fail about a minute later my father's car would turn into the drive. You see Gunner was listening for his master's return. He was alert and waiting and he had better hearing than we did!

In Kondoia this year, we stayed with Iri Mato. He has a night watchman who guards the property. On the last evening, there was a farewell dinner at the Bishop's house. The driver took the Landrover back to Iri's house and left it there. Sometime later, we walked down and found the gate was locked. The watchman had assumed we were all inside and had locked up. We called out but he did not respond. We listened and we could hear him snoring! To wake him up we had to bang on the steel gate with metal. I wondered how much difficulty a thief would have had getting past him!

In the parable, the householder assigned each servant a task. We need to be doing the work assigned to us. Faithful servants do what their master commands looking for his return. The doorman is the most obvious example of the need to watch, but all the servants should give attention to their master's return so their work is done and done well.

What will the master say about your work for him? Are you being faithful? Are you diligent?

Assurances

Finally, if you find this challenging we also have two assurances from the Epistle. We are equipped by God and we will be kept strong by God.

We have the equipping we need as we wait for That Day. Paul wrote, “... you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.”³ As we have been saved and received the gift of the Holy Spirit, Paul tells us we are equipped with the gifts we need to do the job. The master does not leave his servants without the tools to do the job.

Secondly, God will keep us strong because he is faithful: “He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”

So there we have it:

- be faithful in what you are called to do;
- use the spiritual gifts provided;
- watch for “That Day.”

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² 2 Peter 3:9

³ 1 Cor 1:7