

Sermon

Understanding the Times

Luke 21:5-19; 1 Timothy 2:1-6

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These are turbulent times on the world stage: Violence and war, rising inflation squeezing those who were comfortable and bringing misery to those who were already poor.

A pandemic has raged across the planet. Warmongering political leaders seem to have taken the stage, their tempers frayed, spoiling for a fight, stoking the fires of conflict. As a consequence, hunger threatens billions of people.

I would note however, that these are not unique or particularly unusual times in world history. We, however, have lived in a particularly easy period of history and do not like a reversion to less controlled and favourable times.

How should we, as followers of Christ, understand what is happening in our time? Can we view current events from an eternal perspective?

In our Bible reading today, Jesus spoke of tumultuous times to come and warned His followers of two perils: (1) false teachers preaching false hope, and (2) giving way to fear at the thought of what was to come (verses 8-9). Jesus did not want His followers to succumb either to false hope or to faithless despair.

It may be that we are entering a time of great testing. If so, we must not cling to false hope that everything will be easy for us. God had strong words of condemnation for the Old Testament prophets who said "Peace, peace" when there was no peace, when in fact God was about to bring judgment.¹

Jesus offers us comfort – we can gain our souls – but first we must endure and stand firm. We must beware of teaching that everything will be easy for Christians while the rest of the world suffers. This is not what Jesus said. Although the future may be difficult we must not be afraid. Jesus told His disciples not to be terrified by the things that were to come. Paralyzing fear and faithless despair are as unchristian as the mindless determination not to believe that anything really bad could possibly happen to us.

If the Church is to be winnowed and refined by suffering, we must be those who stand firm to the end, not those who give up the faith. Serious mature discipleship is needed. It is no time for complacency. We must

¹ Jeremiah 6:14; Ezekiel 13:10

pray humbly for discernment and wisdom to recognise the truth amidst all the attractive lies that are being peddled, including by those who present themselves as Christian teachers.

Calamities in a broken world

The Fall – Adam and Eve’s first sin in the Garden of Eden – changed everything. God’s perfect creation was broken. Pain and burdensome toil entered into the world, as the Lord God responded. The effects of this ripple out into every area of our lives today, and Satan rejoices in creating havoc and misery.

But it will not be like this for ever. Even before He cursed the ground, God put in place a solution, a salvation plan – the Lord Jesus Christ, who would crush Satan.² It could be said that Christianity began in the Garden of Eden. It was there that the promise was given that Satan’s head would be crushed. That promised crushing of Satan occurred on the cross, and Satan is now in his death throes. But he is still able to wreck and destroy.

The Bible shows us that the underlying reason that some societies are very poor or corrupt; their people wretched, sick and hungry; nations warring; the planet racked by earthquakes, floods and storms, is the Fall. As our Bible passage has shown, these things will get worse. But the unfolding of history is leading to Christ’s return. Salvation is taking us back to Eden, taking us back to what we were meant to be.

“Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom,” Jesus warned His disciples in verse 10. Nationalism is one of major causes of disharmony and violence in the world. But, as the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:20, we Christians are citizens of heaven. Our primary loyalty is not to any earthly realm but to Jesus our King and to His Kingdom. Our first love must be Christ and His Body, i.e. His people.

Living as citizens of heaven

If Christianity transcends nation, race, ethnicity, class and caste what are our responsibilities to the earthly nation of which we are citizens? Of course, we must be good citizens of our own countries, for example by praying for those in authority as we heard in 1 Timothy 2 and paying our taxes as Jesus taught and modelled³. We should obey all laws that do not conflict with God’s commands⁴ although there may be times when we must disobey human orders in order to obey God. A Biblical example of this occurred shortly before the birth of Moses in Egypt. Pharaoh commanded two midwives to kill any baby boys that they delivered for Hebrew mothers, but the godfearing midwives disobeyed Pharaoh and saved the boys.⁵

We can be a channel of God’s blessing in our communities through our prayers and our loving care for others. We can be salt and light⁶ by making known the Gospel and by living godly lives, even if this is countercultural. For example, we could embrace a simple lifestyle, return the change if we are given too much in a shop, and refuse to fiddle our expenses at work. A Barnabas supporter in Northern Ireland, who worked as a cleaner for a non-Christian employer, would hand back part of her wages if she finished her work early.

Some of us may feel a call from God to work to right some of the wrongs, injustices and evils in our world today, as, for example, our Christian forebears campaigned for the abolition of slavery. Given that we are in the world but not of it, how far do we go in cooperating with non-Christians to accomplish such goals? How far do we go in engagement with the essential but somewhat murky world of politics? Perhaps guidance may be found in the wise words of the British politician Sir Stafford Cripps (1889-1952) who said that the

² Genesis 3:15

³ Matthew 17:27, 22:17-21

⁴ 1 Peter 2:12; 4:15

⁵ Exodus 1:15-21

⁶ Matthew 5:13-16

Church should not be in politics but urged that there should be more Christians in politics and more Christianity in politicians. Each of us must prayerfully seek our own answer from the Lord about our own involvement.

Some of these choices and activities may open us to ridicule or worse. But let us take comfort from Jesus' words:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:10)

We must make sure, however, that we are not persecuted for anything except for our Christ-like behaviour and for bearing the Name of Christ (verse 12). His Name means His power, authority and uniqueness as Son of God and Saviour of the world (1 John 4:14). We are identified with Him and we speak for Him in the world.

God will keep us

A time is coming when we, who belong to Jesus, shall be hated by everyone (verse 17). In the midst of such dangers, Jesus gives us a precious promise: "Not a hair of your head will perish" (verse 18). It must have reminded His listening disciples of an earlier time when He had reassured them that the very hairs of their head were all numbered by God, so they should not be afraid in times of persecution.⁷ In the care of providence, absolutely nothing happens to us without God's will.

But moments earlier (verse 16) Jesus had said that some of the disciples would be put to death. Is He contradicting Himself? Of course not. His promise of preservation is about our souls, not our earthly bodies, which will be replaced by resurrection bodies.⁸

In understanding times of persecution, we must realise that it is our eternal souls which are important, not our temporary bodies. "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul," Jesus tells us in Matthew 10:28.

I said last week, that Jesus believed in the Resurrection and as Christians we have the hope of glory – that is of resurrection life. That gives a perspective to suffering.

Viewed from this eternal perspective, the need to seek justice, freedom and equality for ourselves as Christians on earth takes a back seat. These things are good in themselves, but they are not priorities. If wrongs are not righted on earth, they will be righted in heaven.

Many people strive to prolong their physical lives to the utmost. Some wealthy individuals have had their bodies frozen after death in the hope that future scientists will find a way to revive them. But with a proper spiritual understanding of the times, we can resist the desire to preserve our bodies and we can embrace the purposes of God who will keep us for all eternity.

Let us stand firm to the end

Verse 19 is very short but tells us a vital truth: if we stand firm we shall gain our souls. "Standing firm" is the Greek word *hupomone* (pronounced hoo-POM-uh-nay). It means to endure difficulties. It is the perseverance

⁷ Luke 12:6-7

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:35-56

produced when we suffer⁹, when our faith is tested¹⁰ or as we strive to keep on living a godly life in a corrupt and immoral world¹¹.

We need to stand firm in our faith. Jesus said, “By standing firm you will gain life.” (verse 19)

Remember the two main points were that Jesus does not want us to be deceived by false teaching and false claimants to be the Messiah and he warns us about falling away because of fear.

Let us ask Him to give us discernment to understand our times, that we may not be deceived by false teaching, and perseverance to enable us to stand firm to the end.

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⁹ Romans 5:3

¹⁰ James 1:3

¹¹ 2 Peter 1:6