

“TIME’S UP (Mark 48)”
Mark 13:1-37

What fun we could have with this passage! Especially in the light of the news report earlier this week about an asteroid passing close to earth, which a few catastrophising souls predicted would hit the planet and cause all kinds of mayhem, leading effectively to the end of the world. These passages about the “Last Days” always provoke lively discussion and there is a phenomenal amount of time, energy and resources poured into interpreting them. Link this up with bits of *Revelation* and some of the more colourful parts of the Old Testament books of *Daniel* and *Ezekiel* and you could keep talking until the end of the world actually does arrive.

For some people, this is what Bible study is all about. They sit down with their Bible and their daily newspaper, take a squint at a history book and they’re away, tying down each detail in the biblical account with some contemporary figure or situation, proving their own ideas about the goodness or evil of political leaders, providing plentiful ammunition for the wackos who think that hiding in the hills with a shotgun and a crate of baked beans will mean they some how escape the devastation that less holy people will have to endure when Christ returns. There’s a website (www.raptureme.com: American, of course) which gives a daily index as to the likelihood of the world coming to an end based on a careful reading of the Bible and the day’s newspapers. Last time I looked it was around 154 (record high 182, low 57). But the purpose of Jesus’ teaching here – and Mark’s recording of it – is not to give specific information about when the world will come to an end. Jesus is, I believe, pursuing a quite different agenda here.

Let’s just remind ourselves where we’ve got to in this story that Mark is telling us of Jesus’ life and ministry. Having arrived in Palestine as the living embodiment of the words of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus has offered a new way of looking at the world, held out the possibility of a new order, a Kingdom organised and structured according to God’s sovereign will. It’s a Kingdom in which the poor are made rich, the disabled healed, the outcasts included, the forces of evil banished – a Kingdom in which creation is just as God originally intended it to be. And everyone is invited to be a part of it: no-one is excluded.

But those who are serious about this Kingdom, who want to live the life that Jesus offers, have to be prepared to give up entirely their own agendas and trust Jesus for his. That means being ready to make sacrifices. It means being totally committed to Jesus. It means adopting his values of sacrifice and service – and being prepared for suffering, too, in the short term. Jesus has hinted to his close friends – hints that are getting more and more transparent – that this cannot be accomplished without his own suffering and death. With his friends he has travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem to face his destiny and in the few days before the cosmic climax of this story, he is moving around Jerusalem, observing what is happening, commenting on it and teaching all who will listen about the coming Kingdom.

He’s had two or three visits to the Temple. Once to look around. Once to cause havoc as he runs riot in amongst the fraudsters and charlatans who are abusing the courtyards for their own considerable personal gain. Once to teach and make some telling points about hypocrisy and about sacrifice. As he and his friends leave the Temple after this last little episode, one of the people with him comments on the size of the stones used in the building of the Temple walls. Remember, these are people who might visit Jerusalem just once in their lives. They’re sightseers, people from the countryside gawping at the big city. It’s a bit like someone from mid-Devon wandering around Parliament Square or St Paul’s Cathedral on their first visit to London.

And it has to be said, it was a magnificent building. Some of the stones were thirty feet long, and the façade was covered in gold leaf. It stood taller than any other building in the city, a size emphasised by its position at the top of the steep escarpment to the west of the Kidron Valley. Its effect was a bit like Durham Cathedral or Edinburgh Castle. It seemed impregnable – a lasting monument to the constancy of

Israel's religion and national identity. But Jesus responds to the disciple's comments by saying that it will all be destroyed – utterly ruined.

Later in the day, they walk out of Jerusalem on their way down to Bethany, where they're staying, a village a couple of miles to the south-east of the city and they stop for a while on the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. As they sit there, looking across the valley at the sun gleaming off the Temple walls, some of his friends ask Jesus what he was on about when he said it would all be destroyed. How would they know when this was about to happen – if, in fact, Jesus was right about it anyway? In reply, Jesus launches into the longest discourse that Mark records in his book.

In these words, Jesus seems to weave a prophetic description of what was going to happen to Jerusalem in just a few years' time with predictions about the end of the world. In AD70, forty years after this episode takes place, Jerusalem was indeed destroyed and the Temple with it. The Roman General Titus sacked the city completely and the Temple was utterly ruined. The stones were thrown down as Jesus predicted so that the gold leaf could be removed. And the destruction was so great that even now there is continuing debate about where exactly certain walls stood. For the disciples and their compatriots, the destruction of the Temple would mean "the end of civilisation as we know it". And with the material destruction would be the usual legacy of war and conquest – suffering, plunder, torture, death.

As Jesus weaves the words about that into what he has to say about the end of the world, he seems to be suggesting that it will be a similar time. The horrors of the final cataclysmic battle between good and evil which will herald his own return to earth "*in clouds with great power and glory*" (v26) will be just as bad, if not worse. And even between now and then those who follow Jesus will face some of these problems on a regular basis. He talks of persecution and suffering, of wars and calamities and false Messiahs, of acts which are so terrible people recoil before them.

(That's what "*the abomination which causes desolation*" (v14) is all about. From time to time there will be things that are so awful that people will want to flee away. There's been all kinds of speculation about what this might be, but I tend to think that it refers to not one event, but to several throughout history – Antiochus Epiphanes' sacrifice of a pig on the holy altar in BC167: the setting up of Roman military banners in the Temple: the raising of an image of Emperor Caligula in the Temple: the mass murders that have taken place in the name of religion: the eventual appearance of the Antichrist.)

Jesus says that people will come in his name, claiming to be speaking on his behalf, or even claiming themselves to be the Messiah, God's chosen one. Watch out for them and be very suspicious of them, he warns, because they will lead you down all kinds of erroneous pathways. You don't need to be a great student of current affairs to see that such people still set themselves up and some of them are actually able to "*deceive the elect*", to con sincere Christians.

All these things – the suffering, the persecution, the discovery that those who might have spoken in Jesus' name are actually deceivers – all these can easily put people off following Jesus. But there is a need to stick fast to what Jesus himself teaches, a need for endurance. The world might seem a dangerous and treacherous place, but stick in there and follow the way of Jesus. And keep on sharing the good news of Jesus' new Kingdom. That's what he's saying in v10 – "*The gospel must first be preached to all nations.*" What he's really saying is, "Don't spend all your time and energy looking for signs of the end, trying to work out when the world will end and Jesus will return. It's going to happen, so get on and tell people about Jesus and how he will see them through it."

If the people who spend all their time trying to work out the date of the end, the identity of the Antichrist, the spiritual significance of the European Union, the relevance of each and every bombing in Israel and Palestine and all that kind of thing put just a fraction of that time and energy into telling people about Jesus Christ and his message of hope and love, the world would be a very different place indeed. There are those who have their heads so firmly wedged into the more obscure passages of Biblical teaching that

they have lost sight of what is actually going on around them. While they describe in detail the geography of heaven, their friends and neighbours are going to hell.

The key word in this passage is “*Watch*”. You’ll find it – or words like it in vv5,9,23,33. Keep your eyes open and ensure that you don’t fall prey to the deception of those who would claim to speak in the name of God but offer a false hope of salvation. And if you do stick to what Jesus teaches, but life still seems to deal you a bad hand, you do still wonder what on earth is going on as you read your newspapers and listen to the news, you do struggle to make sense of the mess and mayhem of war and violence and injustice and suffering, don’t give up hope. Don’t lose heart – there will be “*wars and rumours of wars*” until Jesus returns. And don’t grow lax – keep witnessing before your friends and neighbours, before “*governors and kings and ... all nations*”.

Don’t fall into the trap of thinking that all this biblical prophecy is here as a kind of puzzle for us to solve, a code that needs to be broken if we are to find the key to salvation. This isn’t some kind of celestial Agatha Christie or John Grisham. Jesus is saying here – as Daniel and Ezekiel and John and others say elsewhere – look, things don’t really make sense at the moment, there’s all kinds of stuff going on that seems alien to God’s will: but don’t worry – it will work out in the end. Just hang in there and keep the faith. Graham Swift, a writer on the New Testament, puts it like this:

“The true purpose of all biblical prophecy ... is not speculative but practical, not to enable us to forecast the future but to interpret the present, not to satisfy curiosity but to deliver from perplexity and to encourage watchfulness.”

A lot of what Jesus talks about in this passage actually happened in the lifetime of the disciples, which is what v30 seems to suggest anyway. We do know that in AD70 the sack of Jerusalem was horrific and barbaric. We do know that the first disciples suffered torture and death for the sake of the gospel. But we also know that such things have continued down through the centuries – often, alas! in the name of Jesus Christ. This was a warning and an encouragement to the friends who were with Jesus, but it still has a powerful message to us today. Jesus is in control. The things that happened to him as he fulfilled his destiny ensure that we can face the future with confidence and so we are liberated from the fear that might otherwise hamper our ability to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God. I’ll close with these words of Charles Moule, another great New Testament scholar:

“New Testament thought on the Last Things, at its deepest and best, always concentrates on what God has already done in Christ. It does not say, How long will it be before the whistle blows full time? Rather, it says, Where ought I to be to receive the next pass? What really matters is that the kick off has taken place, the game is on and we have a captain to lead us on to victory.”

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think people are so interested in the end of the world?
2. What does Jesus mean by “*these are the beginnings of the birth-pains*” (v8)?
3. Does v10 mean that Jesus will not return until everyone has heard the gospel? If so, what should we do about it? If not, what does it mean?
4. What form do “*false Christs*” (v22) take today? How might the elect be deceived by them?
5. What does v30 mean?
6. How, practically, can we “*be alert*” (v33)? Alert to what?
7. What have you learned from this passage? What are you going to do about it?