

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 75”

Matthew 24:1-35

As you may have noticed, this is the 75th sermon in our series on Matthew’s Gospel. We started over three years ago and, although we’ve had some time off for special services, Christmas, Easter and a couple of other short series, we’ve kept plodding through Matthew’s amazing account of Jesus’ life and teaching. We’ve followed the thread of Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of God. We’ve seen how Jesus himself has shown in his own life what the Kingdom could be like. We’ve heard him trying to instil into his disciples the values and goals of this Kingdom.

But it’s a long haul. Why are we doing it like this? Well, firstly, it’s to get a sense of continuity in our understanding of the Bible and of Jesus’ life and teaching in particular. Very often we hop about in the Bible, looking at short passages here and there, without always seeing the overall big picture. Looking at Matthew’s Gospel this way helps us to get a sense of what Jesus was actually about. As Tom Wright explains in his book *How God Became King*, many people in churches know all about Christmas and Easter, but they’re not so sure about what happened in between. I hope we’re starting to get a feel for some of that.

But also it’s a good discipline for both the congregation and the preacher. The temptation can be to linger over our favourite passages of the Bible and to deal with those sections that we think we know a bit about. For preachers, there is always the temptation – even if you use the Lectionary, the set readings for each Sunday that some churches have – to hop over the difficult bits. If you’re working your way through a book like this, it’s a lot harder to ignore the passages that have challenging things to say or are more complicated to interpret for today. And so I might well have left out this passage if I wasn’t afraid that someone might have realised that we’d hopped from chapter 23 to chapter 26 (because chapter 25 is really going to be tough as well!).

This is the last of the “Five Discourses” in this Gospel, five significant chunks of teaching that Jesus delivers during his ministry. Here, once again, he is talking just to his disciples, preparing them for what’s going to happen as they continue the mission which he has begun and for which he has chosen them. It’s about “*The End Times*”, as we put it – a fruitful field for digging about and coming up with all kinds of strange stuff.

And what fun we could have with this passage! Especially in the light of the news reports we regularly hear about asteroids passing close to earth, supermoon lunar eclipses, wayward comets, cataclysmic battles in biblical lands, global empires and the like. 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 somehow escape the devastation that less holy people will have to endure when Christ returns. There's a website (www.raptureme.com: American, of course – also includes advice on how to cope after the rapture, and there is also – I kid you not – a site which will link you up with a non-believing pet-lover who will look after your dog if you are suddenly called away to eternal bliss by the return of Christ) 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 81.8 (record high 188, low 57). Some people take it so seriously that they will really only listen to certain preachers and want to call to their churches pastors with specific views – pre-millennialist, post-millennialist, a-millennialist. (If you press me on my position, I would class myself as a “pan-millinerist”: I'm not sure exactly what's going to happen, but we'll all be wearing nice hats. That has just about as much reliability as many people's views on all this.) But the purpose of Jesus' teaching here – and Matthew's recording of it – is not to give specific information about when the world will come to an end. In fact, as he tells his disciples in *Acts*, that kind of information is really not for them – only God the Father knows the details. Jesus is, I believe, pursuing a quite different agenda in these words.

Let's just remind ourselves where we've got to in this story that Matthew is telling us of Jesus' life and ministry. Having arrived in Palestine as the living embodiment of the words of the Hebrew prophets – something Matthew has been very keen to emphasise for the first Jewish believers who make up his growing church – 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 hopeless given hope, 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 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 just been into the Temple. That's what we've been looking at in the last couple of chapters since he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey at the height of the Passover celebrations. He has caused havoc amongst the fraudsters and charlatans who were abusing the courtyards for their own considerable personal gain. And he has discussed and debated with the leaders of the people – the Pharisees and Teacher of the Law – about his authority, and told stories to make further points about this Kingdom and who will be a part of it. In the last couple of weeks we have heard him making some very telling points about hypocrisy.

As he and his friends leave the Temple after this last little episode, his disciples “*call his attention to the buildings*”. According to the other gospel writers, they comment 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. Listen to these words of Josephus, the great Jewish historian as he describes the magnificence of the Temple:

“The people had performed a work that was greater than could be hoped for ... The pillars were of one entire stone each of them, and that stone was white marble; and the roofs were adorned with cedar, curiously graven. The natural magnificence, and excellent polish, and the harmony of the joints in these cloisters, afforded a prospect that was very remarkable ... Nine of these gates were on every side covered over with gold and silver, as were the jambs of their doors and their lintels; but there was one gate that was without the [inward court of the] holy house, which was of Corinthian brass, and greatly excelled those that were only covered over with silver and gold. Each gate had two doors, whose height was severally thirty cubits (13.7 m), and their breadth fifteen (6.85m). Now the outward face of the temple in its front wanted nothing that was likely to surprise either men's minds or their eyes; for it was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendour, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun's own rays. But this temple appeared to strangers, when they were coming to it at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow; for as to those parts of it that were not gilt, they were exceeding white. Of its stones, some of them were forty-five cubits in length (over 20m), five in height (2.3m), and six in breadth (2.75m).”

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 this final discourse.

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, around 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*” (v30) 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*” (v15) 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 many people*", even to con sincere Christians, to "*deceive the elect*" (v24).

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 v14 – "*This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world.*" 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*" (v4) – and it's even more prominent in the next section. 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 "*the whole world*".

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. All you need for that is Jesus. This isn't some kind of celestial Agatha Christie or John Grisham or Dan Brown. 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.”

What was to happen in the next few days would help to seal this assurance in the lives of Jesus’ followers. They couldn’t work out what was going on – even, a lot of the time, what Jesus was talking about – but they were soon to find out that Jesus’ death and astonishing resurrection put the seal on his promises and enabled them to see that, yes, God is in charge. There is nothing – not even death – that can stand in the way of his purposes being accomplished. And as we look back on their lives and on their continuing of Jesus’ mission, we realise that we, too, can go forward with hope and expectation of a glorious future with him in his Kingdom.

A lot of what Jesus talks about in this passage actually happened in the lifetime of the disciples, which is what Jesus’ use of the present tense 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, using a very helpful analogy with football (or, for those of you with a more violent and uncouth bent, rugby):

“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 v14 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”* (v24) take today? How might *“the elect”* be deceived by them?
5. What does v34 mean?

6. How, practically, can we "*Watch out*" (v4)?

7. What have you learned from this passage? What are you going to do about it?

* It hasn't been very practical to provide a summary of the sermon this week, so house group leaders can use the whole sermon and draw from it the points they want to emphasise.