

**Sermon 25th October 2020, *Matthew 24: 30 -35 (Colossians 3:12-17)*
by Andrew Watts, Licensed Lay Minister at St Mark's**

Bad things are happening at the moment, and it is becoming difficult to listen to the news without becoming downcast. I find myself worrying about whether there are signs that, along with the virus, life in this country is changing for the worse. I realise that some people and families have suffered very grievously in the past few months, and that my family personally has very little reason to complain. But I still find myself worrying.

As far as bereavement goes my oldest aunt, my mother's younger sister, died in the late Spring. My cousin, her daughter, was particularly grieved that she had not been able to visit her mother for weeks and so missed being able to talk to her as her death approached. Is this what people's final weeks are going to be like in post-Covid Britain?

We have six grand-children, three of whom are at school now and I think about the effect on their education. Through them I go back to my own childhood, and I remember my own care-free student days. I remember walking out of my college on my first day as a student, thinking with relief that no-one was going to ask me where I was going or what I intended to do. Now governments tell young people who they can see and where they must stay.

The life of Jesus was lived with a background of the possibility of terrible events. As He came to the end of His life Jesus foresaw the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The final eight chapters of Matthew's gospel are full of tension. In chapter 21 (v. 23 – 27) Jesus was questioned by the authorities about who had given Him the right to say and do what He had made part of His ministry. Then in chapter 22 (v. 15 – 46) Jesus engages in four public controversies with Pharisees and Sadducees, all about tricky questions of the law: whether it was right for a religious Jew to pay taxes to the foreign ruler (Caesar), and so on.

Jesus saw a spiritual angle to all this. In chapter 23, He pronounces, in very formal terms which would have been familiar to any listener who had read the OT prophets, seven ‘Woes’. (Which are the opposite of blessings). These were aimed at the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, who Jesus accused of “Tying up heavy loads and putting them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (23, v.4).

Then we come to chapter 24 which tells us about Jesus and the disciples leaving the Jerusalem temple, and Jesus prophesying its destruction. They move away from the city to sit together on the Mount of Olives, where they can look back at the city and see the temple. And the disciples naturally ask their questions: when will the destruction of the temple take place? And, secondly, When will Jesus’s return usher in the final end of time?

The first half of chapter 24 (verses 4 – 35) is Jesus answer to the first question: When will the destruction of the temple occur? The second answer, about the ultimate fate of the world and the people in it, is addressed from Chapter 24 verse 36 onwards, which comes after our gospel reading. Jesus’s answers to these questions are full of OT imagery and language.

The thought of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple was something that struck at the very heart of that society. For Jews the temple expressed their whole identity: it carried living memories of their history; it was a place to celebrate the triumph of Jewish society and its law; most of all it was a sign that God himself did indeed dwell among them. The destruction of The Temple by the Romans in AD 70, was such a profound event that when it was destroyed, it began the scattering abroad of the adherents of that religion.

Jesus tells the disciples that that final, catastrophic event would be the culmination of a war, in about twenty years’ time. He uses in the verse just before our gospel reading, language which was used in the Old Testament to describe the downfall of the old Babylonian empire and the Kingdom of Edom. I suppose we might say that there are some

historical events that human beings just have to live with, and pray that they get through them.

But notice that there were two elements of hope in Jesus' description. He quotes from the book of Daniel. A figure, who is called 'a Son of Man', is described. This is the name that Jesus gave to Himself. Here is the description from the prophet, written in the book of Daniel: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days (that is, God the Father) and was led into his presence.

He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

The Son of Man is seen as entering heaven and receiving authority from God. And the sign of the Son of Man is seen in the sky: that idea, which Jesus mentions, is taken from the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 11.12; 49:22). From very early days in the church this was seen as a sign of the cross. It is presented in the prophesy as a symbol around which people from all parts of the world can gather. That it is a sign of the cross is not necessarily what Jesus meant, but it is a great thought. Rising to his glory Jesus takes His place beside his heavenly Father and the cross is seen, supremely, as showing us what God is like.

Jesus's answer to the question about when this will happen is that the destruction of the Temple will take place during "this generation". He says, "This generation will certainly not pass away until these things have happened". And indeed the assumption of Jesus into heaven, to sit beside the Father, was believed to have taken place during that same generation.

The second half of chapter 24 is Jesus's teaching about the end of time. The disciples have asked Him when the end of world will come. Jesus is quite clear about that: 'No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'" (Matt. 24: 36).

It seems that Jesus's intention was to downplay discussion about when that will happen. After that, in chapter 26, Matthew begins his narrative about the plot against Jesus, His betrayal, arrest in Gethsemane, His trial and crucifixion.

Notice, what we have just read: God's rule "is everlasting and will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed". Jesus picked up the same idea in the passage which was read to us. He says that "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away". The temple would become a building made with words, rather than with bricks and stones. Indeed it would be a building created out of relationships. That idea is taken up by St. Paul when he reflects on the fact that the physical temple may be torn down. Paul saw that a temple made up of believers was being build up, which celebrated the character and work of their Lord..

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote (Ephesians 2: 19-22):
"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

As we reflect on the difficulty of listening to the news nowadays, let us first remind ourselves that God's kingdom is not a passing or temporary one, but it is long-lasting and unshakeable.

Secondly, I need to remind myself not to spend too much time listening to the daily news, even that from the BBC. I need to spend more time with the words of Jesus, which will reassure me with their spiritual dimension, and be so above specific events that they will help me to get a perspective on the ups and downs of the country's present troubles. Amen