

Sermon: What are the signs of the end?

Reading: Mark 13:24-end

Introduction

Are you long sighted or shortsighted? You may even be blessed to have 20/20 vision. A normal part of the ageing process means our eyes become more longsighted as we get older. I finally understand now why people held their hymn books so far away as they attempted to make the text clearer to read and not just see a blur. The medical term for this is called Presbyopia. The Scriptures are filled with prophecies which are short in coming and others are more long sighted visions of things still to come. Some 80% of the prophecies contained in Scripture have now been fulfilled, which leaves the final 20%. The question the disciples ask Jesus is a question religious groups, sects, cults, skeptics, atheists and agnostics have asked at some point, what will happen at the end of the world?

The study of end times is called eschatology. It's a fascinating subject and gives us much to ponder and discuss as we see events getting closer and the lines that were once bleared are becoming sharper and more in focus. So what does Jesus say about the last days what are we to look out for?

Context

Advent simply means coming and we are to use this time of Advent to prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus as He has promised. Not as a babe in a manger this time for Jesus has already done this, His second Coming will be as King not as servant. This is where our thoughts should be focussed.

The context of our reading today, Jesus has concluded His preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God with a series of parables which is to be the last of His public teachings before He is arrested. As they all leave the temple, the disciples are excitedly speaking about the magnificence of the temple and the beauty of Jerusalem. Jesus stuns them into silence when He tells them 'Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down **(Mark 13:2)**. This is so shocking and hard to conceive, what could possibly happen to bring this about? It has taken over half a century to build this temple, none of them could ever imagine a possible situation in which this great city and temple of God could ever be destroyed.

Later that evening Jesus was resting on the Mt of Olives. Four of His disciples come up to Him privately to ask privately, 'Tell us, when will these things happen?' And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?' **(Mark 13:4)**. Jesus shares two time lines which were still to come (short and long sighted visions). The first one Jesus speaks of the temple and city being razed to the ground. We know from history was fulfilled some 40 years later, in AD 70 when Roman Emperor Titus invaded the Holy Land when over a million Jews were killed in the siege. The second time frame of events will take place outside of the timeline of the disciples lives. Chapter 13 Jesus provides us with a broad overview of events which we are to look out for which will culminate in the end of human history.

Don't be Deceived

We need to note the words of Jesus carefully from here, because the first words He shares about the end times is be careful, be warned, do not be deceived **(Mark 13:5)**! For Jesus says, 'Many will come in my name and deceive many'. Paul also warns us of the same thing in his insights into the 'Last Days' with an addition of a great rebellion which will

come leading to the deception, he writes, 'Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or worshipped, **(2 Thess 2:3-4)**. Jesus referring to this same person calls him the abomination that causes desolation **(Mark 13:14)**.

There is so much confusion today inside and outside of the church which has influenced our culture in ways which has been detrimental to the faith of many. We are indeed living in days of great rebellion. Our culture dismisses anything supernatural when it comes to the origins of life and creation, replaced it with naturalism, random processes which have brought about complex life and order over millions of years through evolutionary process! Many today don't believe in a designer behind the design of life nor a creator behind creation, but believe the lie. Then we have confusion inside the church. Jesus referred to many people are coming in the name of Jesus saying, this is the way we should be walking! We see this today when preachers and teachers add to scripture making it say things it never intended or making changes to the doctrines of the Christian faith, throwing out traditional teachings of Scripture for new culturally sensitive doctrines which go against the word of God. Jesus warns us not to be deceived, which by contrast means many will be deceived! We are to be faithful, vigilant in our faith. We are warned to be on our guard. Deception is subtle, that's why so many fall for it. The new teachings sound good and right, and accepting. The arguments sound reasonable and loving. Teachers and preachers will sound plausible, so many will be deceived.

Paul writing to Timothy says, 'In later times some will abandon the faith to follow deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons' **(1 Tim 4:1)**. Before Jesus begins with signs of the end, He warns us not to be deceived, for many will come in His name and many will be deceived, this is the first sign. We can guard against this by knowing the Scriptures for ourselves, 'The word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path' **(Ps 119:105)**. The Scriptures are non negotiable and cannot be changed for the word of God is eternal, stands for ever **(1 Peter 1:25)**.

Don't be Alarmed

The second thing Jesus tells us is don't be afraid, alarmed, anxious, worried. This is not the way God wants His children to live. News travels so quickly today through mass media and internet, we hear news of wars even before they have started! Wars and rumours of wars, are quickly reported alongside other catastrophic events such as earthquakes and famines. Some will rightly argue, these things have always happened in the world and they are right of course, history shows us this, however we are not to be anxious because these things are going to continue right up to the very end increasing in severity and intensity. We know this because Jesus speaks about them as labour pains **(Mark 13:8)**. This is a good illustration to show increasing intensity as contraction pains occur closer together, with increased intensity, before the birth.

Persecutions

Jesus then speaks about hardships and persecutions. Disciples will be brought before governors and kings, be beaten in the synagogues and told not to preach in Jesus name.! The church was not long in its birth after Pentecost when we read of the persecution breaking out. Stephen became the first deacon martyr, James was killed on the steps of the palace, Peter and John were arrested and brought before governors, Paul was flogged stones, and testified before kings as he defended the faith. Today persecution is still occurring and has increased severely in Kenya and Nigeria and other nations since the Covid lockdowns started. To leave the countries faith for Jesus is dangerous in many nations and even a challenge for those in faith communities in the UK. Afghanistan, Libya,

Pakistan, Sudan, Iran are all in the top 10 nations on the Open Doors watch list for Christian persecution in 2020. (opendoorsuk.org).

The Last book of Scripture

We can't study the end times without referring to the book of Revelation. This book provides us with a fascinating overview of events still to come by giving us a glimpse into the spiritual realm of principalities and powers in the heavenly places (**Eph 6**), alongside the events as they unfold in the world. We should not be afraid to engage with this book as it is the only book in Scripture where the hearer is promised a blessing for reading it (**Rev. 1:3**).

Revelation reveals Christian persecution will also continue with an ever increasing intensity all over the world. The book of Revelation speaks about those who have been martyred, who have been slain for their faith and testimony faithfully maintained in Jesus. These martyrs cry out to God, 'How long Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?' (**Rev 6:10**). They were told to wait a little longer until the full number of fellow servants are killed as they had been (**Rev. 6:10**). This is important to remember, when we read of the war against the saints, we must not become discouraged or lose heart. Jesus tells us this now so when it happens we can stand firm knowing this brings us closer to Jesus return and justice begins. Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me' (**Matt 5:11**). Through faith we must take Jesus at His word.

The Abomination.

Jesus speaks of an abomination that causes desolation, so what or who is this? It's a person who will deceive many and will take his stand in the Holy Place. He will bring an end to temple sacrifices and declare himself over God. For over 2 millennia this passage has been dismissed for there was no longer any Jewish homeland and no temple for sacrifices to be offered. All this changed in our generation in 1948 when the exiled Jews returned to their homeland and in 1967 during the Six Day War, Israel fighting for its very life regained Jerusalem. In 2019, a number of nations around the world moved their Embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognising Israel's capital city as Jerusalem. Many scholars had dismissed the books of Daniel, (Chapter 9) to which Jesus is referring, the book of Revelation as Jesus reveals the end time scenario to John the evangelist and the end time passages we have referred to today, because none of these things were in existence. Yet Scripture God's Word, the final piece in the jigsaw which will usher in the end time tribulation is the Jewish temple and the reinstatement of the sacrificial system. This paves the way for the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition, the abomination that causes desolation passages to be fulfilled (**2 Thess 2:4**). It seems so much has occurred in the last Seventy years, the long sighted view of Scripture is less of a blur these days and coming more focussed as the end times draw closer.

When we turn to Paul's letters he also reminds us not to become unsettled or alarmed (**2 Thess 2:1**), because these things must happen, that's why Jesus warns us about them so the children of light will not be afraid. We are to keep our eyes on Jesus not the coming storm. We must not let ourselves be deceived (**2 Thess 2:3**).

We have never been in such a state of rebellion as we are today as so many turn their backs on God and His ways. American preacher and author John MacArthur spoke this week on the moral free fall of America with this shocking statement on the rebellion against God as a nation saying, "You murder the babies in the womb. If they survive the womb, you try to seduce them into transgender sexual deviation when they're young. If they

survive that, you corrupt them with a godless education. If they survive that, you have divorce in the family and if they grow to be adults, you drown them in a sea of pornography. This is a nation so far down in the sewer of immorality and wickedness that nothing surprises me.” (Nov 2020). Some may well feel so angry at this statement but we cant argue with the so called fruits of the sexual revolution which started in the 1960’s.

The Scriptures tell us the rebellion and the antichrist are currently being held back but Paul speaks of the restrainer being removed, for the rebellion to occur (**2 Thess 2:7**). Most scholars think the restrainer who is holding back Satan and the great rebellion is the Holy Spirit, others think it’s the church, both could be true as long as the church remains faithful Spirit filled and Spirit led. This paves the way for what many call the rapture of believers. This event is a fascinating but i don’t have time to unpack here.

Signs in the Sky

Jesus tells us that following these events, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies shaken (**Mark 13:24-25**). Jesus is not so much quoting from the prophet Isaiah but reiterating what He had revealed to Isaiah (**see Isa 13:10; 34:4**). Jesus has already spoken of an increase in seismic activity (earthquakes) and how these will increase the closer we get to His coming. It looks as though there is to be a seismic shaking which will impact the globe. So devastating will this shaking be that the resulting volcanic eruption will throw so much ash and debris into the atmosphere it will block out the suns light. If we fail to miss the other events Jesus speaks of because we have been deceived, one thing can be relied upon, no one will miss this event! Skeptics mock the idea of stars falling from the sky, however the falling stars doesn’t refer to the stars of the cosmos, but more likely describes meteor showers. Revelation describing the same events, John writes, “There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goats hair , the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to the earth....” (**Rev 6:12-17**). The Greek word used in Rev 6 which describes the same events Jesus is speaking, about stars falling is called asteres (stars) which has its root in the word asteroid. Jesus is saying at this point God has finally called time and His righteous judgments are about to come upon the whole earth.

The Good News Summary

This brings us back to the question the dumfounded disciples asked Jesus, ‘What will be the signs of Your coming?’ Jesus concludes them for us in this passage as recorded by Mark. For what Jesus says next is our great hope. Read the words slowly to let them sink in and weigh up the significance of them. Notice the time - “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And He will send His angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.” (**Mark 13:26-27**).

When lawlessness abounds, when the lawless one is revealed, when the tribulation occurs and an earthquake shakes the nations we are not to be anxious, discouraged or disheartened but raise up holy hands and proclaim as every generation of Christians have done for 2 Millenia, Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, Maranatha - which means Come Lord Jesus Come! Imagine coming through the great deception and rebellion, the tribulation and persecution for the joy awaiting of seeing Jesus returning in all of His glory. Who will see it asks the disciples - ‘The one who perceivers or stands firm to the end will be saved (**Mark 13:13**).

Billy Graham famously said, no matter how bad it gets we should not get discouraged because he’s read the last book and can tells us, “God wins!” Hallelujah. **Amen**