

Signs of the end of the Age

When Ian asked me to take these services I asked him if I was to continue with the series in Matthew? As this is Advent Sunday I was given free reign so the two passages we read earlier are the lectionary passages set for today. Generally Mark's gospel is a simple, yet vivid account of Jesus' ministry emphasising more what Jesus did than what he said. Chapter 13 is unusual in that it is slightly more apocalyptic in style. With hindsight the first part of the chapter up to verse 23 is relatively easy to decipher, speaking as it does of the impending destruction of the temple, the persecution that the fledgling Christian church would face and the potential risks from false prophets and false Messiahs. In verse 24 the mood changes and the opinion of bible scholars is split as to whether the later part of the chapter still refers to the destruction of the temple, or whether Jesus is moving on to speak about his second coming – that time at the end of the world when he will come again in glory to judge the world. Either way we look at it it seems to me that the basic lessons are very similar both for a Christian undergoing persecution in the early Roman Empire or for later generations of Christians living out our lives in these end days.

First of all some comments about the language. Verse 24 sounds a bit scary, does it not?

The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

The stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

The opening verse of Isaiah 64 is in the same vein

O that you would rend the heavens and come down

That the mountains would shake before you.

Is this what will really happen and the answer is – probably not - for two reasons:

1. Firstly the writers are using human language to explain or predict events of which they have no clear understanding except that it will be mind blowing. Just think for a moment of one of the major events of the last century – the fall of the Berlin Wall. Most of us living at the time did not expect such a thing to happen. It was inconceivable that the old communist regimes would crumble so quickly. The newspaper and TV coverage were full of phrases such as mind blowing, earth shattering, a cataclysmic event. What would someone 2,000 years later think reading such reports? They might well be forgiven for thinking it was the result of some natural disaster rather than the concerted application of many German hammers. So language such as used in verse 24 does not necessarily refer to a complete break-up of the universe. It was biblical language commonly used to describe God's awful judgement on a fallen world. When Jesus came at Christmas the mountains did not shake but it was a pivotal moment in human history together of course with a few signs - virgin births, choirs of angels, stars guiding astrologers from the east and so on.
2. Secondly many of these apocalyptic passages were written in times of great persecution or disaster. Daniel at the time of the Babylonian captivity. Mark probably wrote from Rome during the time of the emperor Nero. As a result much of the language is obscure or written in a form that only the

intended readers could understand. A common purpose of such writing was to give hope to the immediate readers but it does make it difficult for us 2,000 years later to understand. I can remember being at Spring Harvest with the main sessions being on Revelation. I cannot remember the speaker's name but he did have a lovely smile and whenever he came to one of the really difficult bits used to smile, look round at us all and say "I haven't a clue".

But what of Jesus' message for today. What are the bits we can understand?

Do not worry about the future

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son but only the Father.

We would all like to know what the future holds for us and those dear to us would we not.

- When younger will I ever find the right partner, pass these exams, get that trial for the Villa.
- When we are on holiday and the flight board comes up "Delayed". Does that mean one hour or will we still be there the next day.
- When you are my age "Will the glaucoma cause blindness before the high blood pressure kicks in.

Many go to desperate lengths to determine their futures - Horoscopes, palm readings, fortune tellers, tarot cards, mediums, divination and such like. Will such seekers get an answer? Probably yes because the devil has power but it will not be an answer from God. One of the dangers of apocalyptic writing is that some people try to figure out precise timings for events reducing biblical prophecy to the level of a horoscope. This passage insists on us leaving things like that to God.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 6 verse 34 "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself". We are to live our lives in daily reliance on Jesus and trust him for the future, because we can look back on his goodness in the past.

So it seems clear in this passage that we are not to dwell on the future but does that mean we are to be unaware of things going on around us.

Be on your guard – be alert

Most modern western houses do not have gatekeepers, it is up to us to lock up and perhaps set the alarm. Some of you might live in accommodation with intercom control systems for additional security. However some apartment blocks or office blocks have full time security staff and this is the sort of picture we have here; a guard who protects his master's belongings from harm and who does it 24 hours a day.

It is probable that much of what is contained in this chapter is primarily aimed at this fledgling church in the first generation trying to work out its place in the world at the same time being constantly reminded that it cannot afford to settle down into some cosy existence and identify itself to either the Jewish or pagan world in which it is situated. The church through the centuries has faced the same dilemma of how to be in the world and yet not contaminated by the world at the same time being alert to opportunities to affect the society in which it is located.

I am sure that many of you listen to the news and wonder what on earth the world is coming to. Wars, civil unrest such as the riots in America, serial killers, bank frauds, the list is endless. But I wonder has the world ever been much different or do modern communications make all these things so much more immediate. Some Christians consider these as signs of the end of the age. They may or may not be right. What I do know is that such things remind us constantly that we are in a battle and we are called to play our part in that battle. We are in the same position as those servants left behind by the master with assigned tasks.

Our assigned tasks

But sadly there is a risk we will pass up those tasks or opportunities we have been given for many reasons. Perhaps we lack encouragement. There is I am told one great difference between the British approach to problems and that of the Americans. The Americans take each challenge as an opportunity and adopt a “can do approach”. The British are supposed to be more negative and always look for the potential problems and difficulties, looking for the things that can go wrong rather than the things that can go right - a “no can do approach”. Now I do not know how true that is but I do know that the Americans I have met can be more encouraging than we tend to be and are often more confident, even though they may be totally wrong, or no more competent than we are.

1. I can remember being in a small Baptist church in Niagara Falls when Marilyn and I were doing the New England and Niagara tour. There were not many there and as a result they could hear Marilyn and I sing quite easily, the upshot being that they asked us to sing to them next week, if we were still going to be around. We had to decline as we were moving on as it really only takes an hour or two to see the falls and there is not much else to see locally, but had we still been there I am far from certain what we could have sung. Is that a no can do approach?? However how many churches in England would have asked complete strangers to do something like that?
2. A number of years ago we provided board and lodging to an American lad who was working at our church on the “Time for God” programme. In many ways he was quite a dozy individual. His main call to fame seemed to be that he could walk from his bed to the shower half asleep and stand under the shower, still half asleep, until the hot water ran out and the cold water woke him up. Nevertheless he did have a high opinion of his own abilities, which probably resulted from the encouragement he received while growing up.

Now I do not actually know if it is true that Americans are more positive than we are but of one thing I am sure. If we are encouraged and receive praise when we try to do things then we will be much more willing to take risks and move into hitherto uncharted territory than we would if every time we try to do something everyone else finds fault, tells us how they would have done it, belittles our efforts and so on. Try to be encouraging!!

We would not be alone in being taken out of our comfort zone. No way Moses was going to Pharaoh, or so he thought. Jonah thought Spain far more attractive than Nineveh. People like Isaiah who said “Lord here

am I send me” or Mary who responded to the angel’s message with “I am the Lord’s servant were rare. It is only by stepping out in faith “Letting go and letting God” that we mature spiritually.

Perhaps we feel our contribution is not important. Some may be called to influence events on a global basis but most of us only work within the confines of family, friends, workmates and such like. In some way maybe, we feel want to be more like our heroes in the faith forgetting

- That great bible expositor we appreciate will have spent hour in study
- That gracious couple who always seem to have time to spare, offer hospitality and good advice will have been doing it for years
- That persons who always seems to be mentioning how she spoke to this one or that one will have done it several times and WOW find it works – some of the time.

Because these people have proved faithful they are given more responsibility. In an interview with a famous golfer the commentator remarked how lucky the man often seemed to be. His response was the more I practice the luckier I get.

Perhaps we get our priorities wrong and so the tasks the Holy Spirit assigns us are being pushed out:

- I do not know about you but I much prefer doing the less important things I enjoy rather than getting on with the urgent but more challenging things I face. Like the schoolboy who has an essay to write but sorts his CD collection
- We may be so busy that we do not deal with those unexpected intrusions in our routine. What do we do for example if two Jehovah’s Witnesses call? Do we stop what we are doing and try to share our faith or say we are too busy?

This is, in parts, a difficult passage and does generate discussion among scholars about what actually Jesus is talking about and what some of it means. However it is always best to concentrate on the bits that are clearer. We are to live our lives in the hope of Jesus return yes, but are also to live our lives in the present ever conscious of the tasks we have been given and the opportunities that come our way. If we discharge those duties as faithfully as we can be certain that when the angels come to gather the elect we will be there. Will we need a parachute? Who knows.