

Scripture Reading For Sunday Nov 18th 2018

Mark 13:1-13 (NIV)

13 As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”² “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately,⁴ “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”⁵ Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you.⁶ Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.⁹ “You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them.¹⁰ And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.¹¹ Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.¹² “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.¹³ Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Sermon: Look Beyond Mere Appearances

The annual church calendar year is coming towards an end; next week we celebrate “Christ the King” Sunday and, after that, the new liturgical year starts with Advent. Today, in preparation for the celebration of the grand finale of Christ’s coming to reign, the lectionary reading focuses on the challenges and persecutions that arise from following Jesus Christ. On one level that might seem like a depressing theme at *any* time of year; it certainly creates headaches for preachers! On the other hand, it reveals that Jesus was a realist and that following him was never going to be easy – and he wanted both to *warn* his followers, and to *encourage* them to be *watchful*¹ and to *endure*.²

The reading today is the first part of Mark 13, which is a long, private discourse between Jesus and his disciples before the momentous events that led to his death. It’s one of the most difficult chapters in the Gospel³ because it is full of Jewish imagery that we struggle to comprehend. It is often referred to as Mark’s “Little Apocalypse” in that aspects of it are in keeping with the popular genre of literature that had arisen in the previous two centuries. “Apocalypse” means to “reveal” or to “make plain”

¹ Mark 13:5,9,23,33,35,37.

² Mark 13:13.

³ Indeed, of much of the New Testament; this passage is repeated – almost verbatim - in Matt 24 and Luke 21.

something that is hidden; even so, the language used still seems very mysterious and not at all clear to us – just like that in the book of Revelation! And this means that you can run down all kinds of rabbit holes in trying to understand the images and, consequently, miss the big picture. What I have also discovered in preparing for this sermon is that scholars even question whether this is a genuine ‘apocalypse’ because that form of literature had a distinctive style and this does not really conform to that pattern; at least not consistently.⁴ My own view, for what it’s worth, is that versus 24 to 37 are better understood as apocalyptic, or a description of the difficult *end-times* before history comes to its conclusion. Our reading today, from verses 1 to 13, should be understood in the context of the *immediate* future, extending for just several decades. Even so, the main points are ones of *warning* and *encouragement*, rather than a detailed prediction of events. And so, rightly or wrongly, that’s how I’m going to treat our text this morning. I want to try and break it down into three parts: first, Jesus’ message *to his disciples*; second, Mark’s *readers* likely understanding of this passage; third, what are *we* to make of this for us, today.

Jesus has finally arrived in Jerusalem; he came riding in on a donkey as a humble king in peace. Even so, he confronted the corrupt and burdensome practices in the temple⁵ and verbally challenged the religious leaders with *wise* teaching that demonstrated his authority to speak on behalf of God. While he came in peace, he was prepared to oppose the religious establishment because they were perverting the spirit of the Old Testament law for their own gain. Remember, too, that the *temple* was a grand, physical building that both embodied *and* symbolised the institutional heart of Judaism. Beginning in about 20 BC, King Herod the Great began major renovations to the temple and they were still underway in Jesus’ day. It was certainly the largest and most imposing structure for hundreds of miles in any direction. We are told that as Jesus left the temple one of his disciples said to him, “Just look at these tremendous stones and buildings!”⁶ And Jesus said to him, “You see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left on another. All will be thrown down.”⁷ That a stunning statement, not just in terms of the physical picture of this magnificent structure in ruins, but of the symbolism of what that means to the *institution* of Judaism. Jesus is telling his disciples to *look beyond mere appearances*.

We are then told they went to the Mount of Olives,⁸ from where you get a spectacular view of the temple, and Jesus sat down to teach his disciples. They asked two questions: “*When* will all this happen?” and “What will be the *sign* that they are all about to be fulfilled?”⁹ Jesus doesn’t answer the first, question; in fact, later on he states, *he* doesn’t know *when* the temple will be destroyed, even the

⁴ This is evident in commentaries. However, the NIV Bible gives a misleading heading for the whole section as “The Destruction of the Temple and Signs of the End Times”; compare that to the various headings in the NRSV. These headings reflect the theological views of the translation committees/editors/publishers and can shape how one comes to the text.

⁵ The temple reforms Jesus tried to instigate were never going to last, but he had made a public point and shamed institutional Judaism. Symbolically, this implies the temple is barren of true worship - like the religious leaders who serve it.

⁶ Mark 13:1.

⁷ Mark 13:2. The conversation seems to have been overheard and deliberately misconstrued in that the destruction of the Temple was referred to in Jesus’ trial (Mark 14:58) and death (Mark 15:29). See also Mark 15:38!

⁸ The significance of location is important here, see Zech 14:4–5; (Zech 14 is another example of apocalyptic writing.)

⁹ Mark 13:4.

angels don't know – only God knows.¹⁰ And remember, the *subject* of the “when” question is the *destruction of the temple, not the end of the world*. He then talks about “signs,” and it is in understanding and interpreting those signs that the difficulties I mentioned earlier begin.

The first thing Jesus says is very pastoral: “*Beware that no one leads you astray,*”¹¹ Be watchful, be discerning. Words like that are repeated *six* times in this chapter, so clearly that is his key take-home message. “Don't be fooled, many will come claiming to speak on my behalf, some will even claim they are the Messiah, and they will lead many astray.”¹² Jesus then adds, somewhat cryptically, “Even when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, *do not be alarmed*; this must take place, *but the end is still to come*. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”¹³ So the second thing Jesus says, is don't be alarmed when wars, earthquakes, and famines happen, because they “must” take place.

That kind of rhetoric is *very* apocalyptic, with its deterministic and pessimistic view of history.¹⁴ The language of “these things *must* take place” implies predestination, and many Christians [Calvinists] believe in such a God who directs and controls every last detail of history, and Mark seems to share that view. But not all Christians, including me, view God as a micromanager and we need to be careful in simply projecting the characteristic style of apocalyptic writing on to the character and action of God. God *is* at work in history, but his action is much more subtle than the word “predestination” implies. (That is a much bigger topic for another occasion!)

While we today may have issues with this kind of rhetoric, 1st century Jews had no problems at all! They loved it, because underlying this strange imagery is Yahweh vindicating Israel at last. The Jews, however, would find the notion of the *temple* being destroyed *very* offensive. That was totally unthinkable because the place and role of the temple was central to their understanding.¹⁵ We see that veneration today at the Wailing Wall, the only remaining part of the temple that was not destroyed in AD 70. But Jesus' statement indicates the temple is *not* the institutional foundation of the *kingdom of God*. The temple can and will be destroyed *without* thwarting God's plans for history. Incidentally, John's Gospel interprets this prediction as the focus of divine presence no longer being in a *place*, but in a *person* – in Jesus the Messiah.¹⁶ And Paul's post-resurrection theology places the new temple in the “body of

¹⁰ Mark 13:32.

¹¹ Mark 13:5b.

¹² Mark 13:6. The Greek for “I am he” (NIV) is simply “I am” (NRSV), and that has messianic – even divine – implications.

¹³ Mark 13:7-8.

¹⁴ It often has a dualistic worldview too, of God battling with Satan and the forces of evil in cosmic war.

¹⁵ You can hear their thought process: “How could God *possibly* let that (the temple's destruction) happen?”

¹⁶ John places the clearing of the temple courts near beginning of his gospel, thereby making a theological point; see John 2:13-22. The destruction of the temple is also mentioned by Jesus, and John interprets the temple (and it being rebuilt in three days) as Jesus' own body.

Christ,” the Church – and that is the *people* of God, *not* a geographical place, nor a building, nor an institution; it is *in* the collective people of God that the Holy Spirit resides.¹⁷

But, going back to Jesus’ warning, when you hear of an earthquake in one place, that doesn’t necessarily mean there could be another one about to strike Jerusalem. And just because you hear of a war somewhere, it doesn’t mean tomorrow it will be the city gates. Two of the things that Jesus’ followers must, therefore, learn are *patience* and *hope*. False teachers, frightening rumours, and natural disasters tend to create panic. They must resist that temptation, because these are only those initial labour pains that indicate that the “baby” is *definitely* coming - and coming soon.¹⁸ Jesus is simply warning his followers that the arrival of the age to come – the reign of God – will involve suffering.

He then tells them to be on their guard because they will be persecuted in the synagogues and before civic leaders; even people they trust – like family members – will betray them.¹⁹ Some of his followers will even be killed. If this is meant to be a pep talk to rally the troops, one can only wonder what the disciples thought! Jesus is telling them straight to expect to experience the kinds of things he will experience, namely: rejection, betrayal, arrest, trial, flogging, death. He is warning them that, what is imminently about to happen to him, they too will face in the future. But there is nothing new here, recall that after Jesus *first* told his followers that he “*must* be killed and rise again,”²⁰ he then said to them: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”²¹ Jesus is simply reiterating that a disciple follows in the master’s footsteps, and that includes the path of suffering for the cause of the kingdom of God. Jesus includes three further important points: “the gospel *must* first be preached to all the nations,”²² the same Holy Spirit who is within him will be powerfully at work within them too,²³ and “the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.”²⁴ Jesus is saying *not* to be sidetracked by all these calamities, be focused on preaching the message of the kingdom of God. And not only be *watchful*, but to continue to be faithful – *endure* to the end!

Let’s move on. What would Mark’s *readers* make of all this, some 35-45 years later? Christians had already experienced persecution at the hand of Rome for a decade or more, so Jesus’ description on that score would have sounded very personal. In the 60s AD, Jewish Christians also knew of those Jews who went around the countryside seeking recruits to overthrow the Romans in the name of the Messiah.²⁵ Christ’s message to “beware of false teachers who want to promote victory by violence” would have been a timely warning and serve as a reminder of the non-violence of Jesus and his

¹⁷ See 1 Cor 3:16-17, 6:19, 12:27; Rom 12:1-2.

¹⁸ Mark 13:8b.

¹⁹ Mark 13:9-13.

²⁰ Mark 8:31.

²¹ Mark 8:34. (Interestingly, there is a seemingly apocalyptic reference in Mark 8:38-9:1 at the conclusion of that dialogue.) See also John 15:20.

²² Mark 13:10.

²³ Mark 13:11.

²⁴ Mark 13:13.

²⁵ Mark 13:6,21-22.

message. Nevertheless, there *was* an extensive and terrible war against Jerusalem in AD 66-70. After the death [suicide] of Emperor Nero in AD 68, there was a short period of civil war. In AD 69, there were *four* short-lived emperors in just *one* year. To those far away from Rome, there were indeed “wars and rumours of wars” as you tried to keep up-to-date with distant events.²⁶ The temple *was* destroyed in AD 70, along with much of Jerusalem, and scholars are not sure if Mark’s gospel was written just before or just after that momentous event. Regardless, reading these words *after* AD 70 only serves to demonstrate that Jesus was a true prophet. Given the *symbolic* importance of the temple to Jews and Christians, its destruction might have meant many in Mark’s day were inclined to think the final judgement was near. Jesus says, “*no, it’s not*” – that is just the *beginning* sign of labour pains. Yet, as intense as such pains are, there is also the promise of new life, therefore hold on in hope for the kingdom of God is at hand.²⁷ Mark, in the rest of the chapter, makes it clear to avoid such speculation and continue to preach the good news to the whole world. In other words, Mark uses these words to Jesus to respond to the timely question of his own day, namely, “What do all these events mean?”

What does this mean for us today? First, we need to be thankful that we live in Canada and for the religious freedom we have today. But we must also be mindful that Christians in many parts of the world do not live in places of tolerance and some experience physical or economic persecution - just as the early Church did. We don’t face such suffering for following Jesus; we face a different problem, namely, the potential to stagnate in our faith, or become cynical about it, or to suppose God is *not really* at work in history, or simply to dismiss Christ’s message of the kingdom of God as a pious dream. Therefore, the key message to “be watchful” is still relevant. *Look beyond mere appearances*, because they are often deceiving. In our relative comfort, be alert to the temptations that can lead us astray to worship other idols. In a culture that is fixated on image, beware of blindly following charismatic leaders; is their message and life consistent with that of Jesus Christ? Beware of false leaders who speak in Christ’s name, but only want your money! And beware of equating spiritual growth with the size of a congregation or budget, for that is the yardstick of consumerism. Be discerning; don’t be led astray!

Second, be mindful of the signs of our times. Yes, we have many freedoms in Canada, including religious freedom, and we need to treasure and preserve them for the wellbeing of all. But when we look at the stresses the Western world - in Europe, including Britain’s Brexit, and within the US - we see “tolerance” itself is under threat by the rise in antisemitism, racism, xenophobia, and nationalism. Minorities, including religious minorities, often become the scapegoats of the majorities; that was true in Jesus day

²⁶ Incidentally, Mark 13:14 alludes to Antiochus Epiphanes’ desecrated temple in 167 BC by offering pig’s flesh of the great altar and by setting a public brothel in the sacred courts. Moreover, before the very Holy Place itself, Antiochus set up a statue of Zeus and ordered the Jews to worship it (see also Dan 9:27, 11:31, 12:11; 1 Macc 1:54). Later, in 39 AD, Emperor Caligula heard of the “image-less” worship in the Jerusalem temple and wanted to insert his own stature within it. His advisers did all they could to persuade him not to do so, for they knew that if he did, a bloody civil war would result. He was obstinate; fortunately, Caligula died in AD 41 before he could carry out his plan of desecration (although he tried!). Regardless, anything that takes the place of worshiping God is a “desecration”!

²⁷ Mark 1:14-15.

too. If we don't speak up for the powerless, we *all* will be the losers as a society. *Beware, look beyond mere appearances.*

Finally, every major world crisis brings some Christians to consider the events as evidence of the signs of the end of the age. Jesus provides the fundamental response, even to those who claim to speak "in his name": the end of time is *not* signaled by such events. Instead, we should remember that we have only one concern: to faithfully spread his message of good news to all peoples. And that *is* a word of encouragement to endure as the season of Advent approaches. Let us pray.