

**MATTHEW 24:1-14**  
**ST JOHN'S; 5.11.17; 9.30 am**

**INTRODUCTION**

As we approach the end of the church's year, so we come towards the end of our journey through Matthew's gospel. Since early October, we've heard gospel passages from the last week of Jesus' life, following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. Each day during that week, Jesus went into Jerusalem, and spent much of his time teaching publicly in the temple, refuting the attacks of powerful groups like the chief priests, teachers of the Law, elders, Pharisees, members of Herod's party, and Sadducees. Each evening, he went out of the city to stay overnight at Bethany, presumably at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

The first words of today's reading are *Jesus left* – Jesus leaves the Temple for the last time. His public teaching is over. What he has to say over the course of the next two chapters is for his disciples' ears alone.

The Temple was considered to be one of the most beautiful sights in the world. It had been rebuilt by Herod on a colossal scale, and the building work was still in progress. Pious Jews from across Judea and Galilee would visit it three times a year for the major festivals. It was central to their faith; built on the place which the Lord had chosen for a temple for his Name. They considered it to be indestructible. And yet, Jesus' disciples had heard him, time and again, implying that he (not the Temple) was the centre of God's work of healing and restoration.

Over the last few days, they've been with him as he's sat, in the Temple itself, and implied that the whole place was under judgment. And not only that, but that he had the right to pronounce that judgment. Now, Jesus has left the Temple for the last time; God's glory has departed from the Temple with him. He spells it out to his disciples, who are still fascinated by *its buildings: I tell you this: not a single stone here will be left in its place; every one of them will be thrown down* (v 2).

The disciples are willing to take Jesus at his word. But they can't conceive of the world carrying on without the Temple. "*Tell us when all this will be,*" they asked, "*and what will happen to show that it is the time for your coming and the end of the age.*" In their minds, if the Temple is to be destroyed, then the end of the age will have come, which means Jesus' *coming*, or the revelation of his power.

So there are three events in the disciples' minds as they ask Jesus their question: the destruction of the Temple; Jesus' appearance as king; and the end of the age. For the disciples, these three events must all be part and parcel of the same single, event. Over the coming chapter, Jesus teases it all out for the disciples. They need to understand that the destruction of the Temple, and the events surrounding its destruction, *are like the first pains of childbirth* (v 8). They'll be earth-shattering events; it'll be hard to accept that they don't mean the end of the age has come; but Jesus' followers need to *Watch out*, and not allow anyone to fool them (v 4).

## THE FIRST PAINS OF CHILDBIRTH

Jesus' prophecy that *not a single stone here will be left in its place* (v 2) was fulfilled in AD 70. The Jewish nation had rebelled against the Romans, and in suppressing the rebellion, the Romans destroyed the Temple. All that's left today is the massive platform on which the Temple stood; the Western Wall is part of that platform – it's the closest that Jews have been able to get to praying in the Temple for the last 1,947 years.

It's hard to understand exactly what Jesus is talking about in the passage we've heard today. It can be read as Jesus' description of the period of 40 years or so between the day he delivered this discourse and the destruction of the Temple. In that case, the warnings which Jesus gives to his disciples are quite specifically for them and the very early church. On the other hand, these verses can be read as a very general description of the suffering of the world and of the church up to the time when *this Good News of the Kingdom* has been *preached through all the world* (v 14). *Then the end will come*, says Jesus.

As Jesus talks to his disciples about the future, Michael Green says, 'In the middle distance is the judgment at the fall of Jerusalem. In the far distance is the judgment at the end of the world. They are connected. The one sheds light on the other.'<sup>1</sup>

In some ways, the disciples had it right. The destruction of the Temple, Jesus' appearance as king, and the end of the age are all part and

parcel of the same event. But from our perspective, nearly 2,000 years later, it's clear that the destruction of the Temple wasn't a sign that the time had come for Jesus' appearance as king and the end of the age.

## CONCLUSION

The question for us is, what is the Lord saying to us, as his followers nearly 2,000 years later? For us, the destruction of the Temple is in the distant past. We're still waiting for Jesus' appearance as king and the end of the age. How do these verses apply to us?

Clearly, if these verses are a very general description of the suffering of the world and of the church up to the end of the age, they apply to us directly. But even if their immediate application is restricted to the period leading up to the destruction of the Temple, we can still learn much from Jesus' teaching here.

The key message is not to speculate or to worry about the exact date of Jesus' coming and the end of the age. Amongst every generation of Christians over the last nearly 2,000 years there have been those who have predicted the imminent end of the age. Today, when we know what's going on all over the world within hours of the actual events, we hear every day *the news of battles far away*, of countries fighting each other, of *famines and earthquakes everywhere* (vv 6-7). If we read the Christian press, we also hear frequently of fellow-believers *arrested and handed over to be punished and be put to death* (v 9). It's not surprising that we also hear Christians predicting that the end is nigh.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Green, [The Message of Matthew](#), (Leicester, IVP, 1998,2000), p 249

Don't be fooled by false prophets – whether they claim to be part of the mainstream church, or whether they're from groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Lord has never revealed the date, or even the general timescale, of the end of the age. As Jesus himself said, *No one knows, however, when that day or hour will come—neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son; only the Father knows* (Mark 13:32)

Like Jesus' original disciples, we're called to be faithful, and not to be alarmed by the upheavals going on around us. There are plenty of upheavals just within the church – here at St John's, and more widely across our Diocese. Jesus' original followers had to accept the loss of the Temple and all it stood for, and build a church based instead on the person and work of Jesus. That was a far greater change, and a much greater challenge, than any we have to face. But, as I've said before, we do have to accept the loss of the church we've known all our lives, and to begin to build a church which is fit and able to *preach this Good News of the Kingdom* in C21 Britain. We're called to hold onto Jesus himself. We're to continue to trust him. We're to look forward to the day of his coming. We're to live faithfully through the birth pangs of God's new age. We're not to allow ourselves to *be troubled*. We're not to give up our faith. We're not to betray or hate one another. And we're not to allow our love to grow cold. In other words, we're to hold out *to the end*.