

Sermon for 14th November 2021, James Parsons

Hebrews 10:11-25 & Mark 13:1-8

Through your word, and the meditations of all our hearts, may we live life well together in the flow of God's love. Amen.

I sometimes wish that my Bible didn't include headings. In my Bible today's Gospel has, "Signs of the End of the Age". It was difficult not to read this passage, and the verses that follow, through this particular lens. So, let's start with this theme.

Recent events and what we're currently seeing in the news could be interpreted by some as fulfilling the prophecy Jesus gave to his disciples.

In today's Gospel passage we read that Jesus says:

- "You will hear of wars and rumours of wars." - Will Russia invade Ukraine or China invade Taiwan?
- "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom." - closer to home, our own country isn't exactly getting on well with our neighbours in Europe, or even between home nations.
- "There will be earthquakes in various places" - earthquakes happen all the time but it's only a few weeks since Haiti was struck by another damaging one.
- "and famines." - In addition to several African countries and elsewhere, 23 million people in Afghanistan, that's 60% of that its population, are facing severe famine as a result of herd depletion, displacement due to the conflict and drought.

Something similar is written in each of the Matthew and Luke Gospels, but Luke, perhaps because it is believed he is a medical doctor, includes in his list of signs (Lk. 21:11), "plagues" - does this sound familiar?

All these signs might indeed be cause for fear, panic or alarm. But Jesus says, "Do not be alarmed." And Jesus does promise (Matt. 28:20), "And surely I will be with you to the very end of the age." Do not be alarmed!

But then I received an email from a friend, Brian, in which he shared some recent reflections of his own on the same similar passages of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Brian had been meditating on what Jesus prophesied about the temple itself, rather than the signs of its demise. Perhaps I could revise the heading in my Bible to, "The End of the Temple in Jerusalem." So, let's continue with this theme.

Often the largest buildings in any town or village, at least before post-industrial times, is the church building - think of Gloucester Cathedral or Tintern Abbey, St Mary's Priory in Chepstow, or even our own Parish Church in its prominent position overlooking the River Severn.

If we could go back to the city of Jerusalem in Bible times, about a thousand years before Jesus, the biggest building you'd see is the temple. It was a beautiful building designed by king David and built by king Solomon. It represented the dwelling place of the God of the universe; the building was a symbol that pointed to the fact that all creation is God's temple.

It's walls were decorated with carvings of palm trees and open flowers, all overlaid with gold, and lilies and pomegranates. The temple contained many objects that were symbols from the garden of Eden, the place where God dwells with his people.

The temple had priests who were commanded to work and to keep the temple in God's presence. This is like the job description given to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Like Adam and Eve, Israel's leaders also wanted to rule on their own terms, and they too were exiled.

The temple was then destroyed, and this left them wondering, did God give up on Israel? Will God bring about a new creation? Well, the biblical prophets anticipated the day when God would create a new temple, with a new priesthood; that's when God's presence would fill all of creation.

And when the Israelites returned to the land, they did rebuild the temple; this was about 500 years before Jesus. But that temple didn't turn out the way the prophets hoped. Later Israelite prophets said that this temple was hopelessly corrupt.

It was this rebuilt temple that Herod the Great had just completely refurbished and extended, like an enormous reordering project. It had taken 46 years (Jn. 2:19-22)! According to the 1st century historian, Josephus, the temple was an awe-inspiring wonder. It's retaining walls had stones forty feet long and weighing over 100 tonnes. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the outside walls that anyone who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked blinding themselves.

Accordingly, the disciple in today's Gospel is impressed, and tries to share his sense of awe with Jesus. "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

But Jesus isn't dazzled. He replies, "Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

The disciple sees an architectural marvel, the biggest, boldest and most unshakeable symbol of God's presence imaginable. He sees religious memory. He sees his people's identity.

But this isn't what Jesus sees. Jesus has seen that the temple itself has become more important to the people than the One it was built to house or represent or whose presence it was meant to be a symbol of.

In these three passages Jesus begins to share things about his death and resurrection and about the times to come. Some things are for that generation, like his resurrection and the destruction of the temple - the temple (and Jerusalem) was eventually destroyed by the Romans, about forty years later, as retaliation for an ongoing Jewish revolt. Other things Jesus says are for generations to come and the timing of which are firmly in the mind and will of God the Father.

Back to my friend's email, Brian wonders: "What if the temple had not been destroyed and was still standing today?" What a huge distraction it would be to the church. A focus for Christians who worship the God who does not live in buildings made by human hands. Three faith groups would be squabbling over access, ownership and importance.

We have enough distractions with buildings as it is, and Jesus had a much better plan in mind.

He built back better.

After his resurrection, Jesus said that God's presence would come back and dwell in and among his followers. Communities of people where God rests and rules. This is the Bible's vision of the church, which is described as a temple.

Peter, one of the four disciples who approached Jesus about what he said, eventually understood what Jesus meant. Peter says (in 1 Peter 2:5), "you all (that's you and me), like living stones, are being built as a spiritual house (a temple)." And the Apostle Paul says (in 1 Cor. 3:16), "Don't you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" and (in 1 Cor. 6:19), "Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"

Do you see? We don't need a physical temple any longer. We don't need a place where priests repeatedly go to make sacrifices on our behalf. No, "because by one sacrifice he, Jesus Christ, has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy" (Heb. 10:14).

A new temple rises that is much more magnificent than any physical building ever could be, because it is made from living stones. Each one a transformed life, filled with the Holy Spirit and reflecting his glory.

So, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart, in full assurance of faith.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, no matter what alarming situations we hear about or find ourselves in, for he who promised is faithful.

Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.

Let us encourage one another - and all the more as we see the Day approaching.

Finally, let us do all this so that we can look at the new living temple and say to the Lord, "What great stones! What a magnificent temple you are building."

Amen!