

DATE: Sunday November 14, 2021

CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington

BIBLE PASSAGE: Mark 13:1-11

GENERAL THEME/TOPIC: Apocalyptic – Second Coming

Let me tell you what's about to happen ... at the end of this sermon, you won't have been inspired to rush home and get stuck into some form of Christian living. This sermon is a bit of a Bible background study that will inform your mind, perhaps throw some light onto a tricky passage of the Bible, and hopefully give some insights into how to read tricky parts of the Bible.

We read books of so many and various genres – fiction and non-fiction; technical and escapist. We read romances, adventures; historical dramas; Westerns; detective novels; science fiction. But nowhere do we read any apocalyptic. That's a good word ... "apocalyptic." It means "an unveiling," a "revealing." The gospel reading that we just finished from Mark 13 is "apocalyptic literature." It contains strange ideas, and weird visions and unsettling aspects. Apocalyptic is a particular sort of Jewish literature.

Mark chapter 13 is one of the most difficult chapters in the New Testament for us modern, western readers to understand, because it is one of the most Jewish chapters that was ever written in the Bible. From beginning to end it is using terms of Jewish history and Jewish ideas. All through it Jesus is using terms and pictures that were very familiar to the Jews of his day, but to us in our day these terms and pictures are really strange.

This chapter is the source of many ideas about the Second Coming of Jesus. Some Christians merely nod their heads in the direction of the teaching about Jesus' Second Coming, but other Christians become almost obsessed with it and can become unbalanced about it.

So there are 3 things already that may have already informed your mind ... Mark 13 is a thoroughly Jewish chapter ... it's "apocalyptic literature" ... and Mark 13 is about the Second Coming of Jesus.

Lying in the background of everything in Mark 13 is the Jewish idea of "*The Day Of The Lord*." The Jews never doubted that they were God's Chosen People – the whole of the Old Testament informed them about God's covenant with them that made them God's chosen people. And the Jews never doubted that one day they would occupy the place in the world that they **deserved** as God's Chosen people. But they knew that they would never get that place by human means, military or political. They believed that in the end, God would intervene in history and God would win that place for them. The day when God would intervene for the Jews is called *The Day Of The Lord*. Before that day arrived, there would be a time of terror and trouble. The *Day Of The Lord* itself would be a shattering time when the world would be shaken to its foundations, the Jews believed, and God's judgement would come, the Jews believed.

But those troubles would be followed by the new world, and the new age, and the new glory for the Jews. This was wonderful *optimism* – the Jews were absolutely certain that God would break in. But it was also bleak *pessimism*, because the belief in *The Day Of The Lord*

was based on the idea that the world was completely bad, and only its complete destruction would be good enough for the emergence of God's new order. The Jews did not look for **reformation** of the world ... they looked for a **complete remoulding** and a complete **re-creating** of the entire scheme of things.

In the Old Testament there were various references to this sort of thing. The prophet Amos wrote "Wailing shall be in all the broad ways. In all the vineyards shall be wailing, for I, the Lord will pass through the midst of you, says the Lord." (Amos 5:16-20). And the prophet Joel is a real misery guts about the Day Of The Lord. "The day of the Lord is a day of darkness ... I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood and fire, and pillars of smoke." (Joel 2 and Joel 3.)

So ... all through Mark chapter 13 Jesus was speaking the language, using the imagery, showing the apparatus of apocalyptic literature, and trying to help his Jewish hearers understand. He was working with the only ideas that the people knew. But he knew, and they knew, that these things were only pictures, only images, for no-one knew what God would do when God broke through.

These images are not meant to be taken literally. They are meant as impressionistic pictures, as seers' visions, designed to impress upon people the greatness of the event when it should come.

Review

So there are the 3 things we saw before ... Mark 13 is very Jewish ... it's apocalyptic literature ... and Mark 13 is about the Second Coming of Jesus. Let's add to those 3 things the Jewish idea of *The Day Of The Lord* that would bring in the Jewish people's victory – a day pictured as a day of darkness and disaster. And let's also add the fact that the images are not to be taken literally. They are Jewish images from the Old Testament.

Moving on

Then there's another slightly revolutionary thought. Jesus in Mark 13 is not giving us a timetable of future events that will precede his second coming, nor is Jesus giving us a map of eternity. Jesus here is simply using the language and pictures that most Jews knew and that the prophets had used for centuries before Jesus.

I know that there are some Christians who hear on the news about earthquakes or volcanic eruptions or about solar or lunar eclipses, or about floods or bushfires, and they immediately think that Jesus' second coming is upon us. They regard natural disasters as God's timetable. But Mark 13 is not a scientific statement, it is not a meteorological analysis, and it is not a commentary on political or military happenings. It is a Jewish presentation of a Jewish hope that Jewish ascendancy will be achieved.

But ... with all that in mind, in Mark 13 Jesus is speaking about his Second Coming ... in very, very Jewish terms.

We can best make sense of what Mark 13 is all about *for us* in the words we use in the Nicene Creed Sunday by Sunday. "He will come again in glory..." or in the Apostles' Creed,

“... seated at the right hand of the Father; from there he will come ...” It is an article of our faith that the Second Coming of Christ will be a certain event in future history. For many of us, we will meet Christ at the time of our physical death. For others yet unborn, the Second Coming of Christ will be a future cosmic event of history, wrapping up this earth as we know it.

The important thing in Jesus’ teaching, is not trying to work out a timetable of events or predicting a date for the second coming. The important thing is that we are ready to meet him. Jesus’ Parable of the Talents has this teaching – be ready to meet him by being faithful now in what we do with our talents. Jesus’ Parable of the Wedding Feast also has this teaching – be ready to meet the heavenly bridegroom when he comes. Jesus’ Parable of the Prepared Householder also has this teaching – be prepared. Jesus’ Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids has this teaching – be ready to meet him when he comes.

There is no timetable revealed in Astronomy or Cosmology or Meteorology or in Mark 13. Our task as Christians, is to worship and live and work for the kingdom of God now, and to be ready when he comes and calls us to our heavenly home, whenever that may be.