

Signs of the end.

Luke 21:5-19

November 18, 2007

I don't know whether you've seen them, but there've been a number of sci fi movies about asteroids hitting the earth over the years. And while they might seem a bit far-fetched, there's often a tiny seed of truth behind the way-out stories. It wasn't long ago now that there was an announcement in the news that an asteroid was actually on a collision course with Earth and would hit in the year 2028. We now know that the calculations weren't quite right and that the asteroid will only get close - and by 'close' the scientists mean it'll miss us by about half a million miles. But we need to keep in mind that the Earth has been hit before by meteorites and probably will again someday. We don't know when, but we do know it's likely to happen - and when it does the

energy released would be something like several nuclear warheads going off simultaneously. So I think people would notice it if it happened!

Well in Jesus' day dramatic and unexpected happenings in the night sky were often thought to signify more than just physical disaster. People studied them because they believed they would tell them about the rise and fall of kings and empires. (As indeed they did to a group of Wise men in a far off country!)

So when Jesus' disciples asked him about how they would know when the frightening events he was talking about were going to happen, some mighty event is probably the sort of thing they had in mind. Surely Jesus would want them to be prepared?

Well Jesus does give them signs of a sort (as we'll see) - but the main thing he wants them to learn is

to be patient when dangerous and testing times come.

So what's the big event waiting to happen?

Luke, more than the other gospel writers, has prepared us for the answer. His alert readers wouldn't have been surprised at Jesus' prediction about the destruction of the Temple - it's been anticipated in all the stuff he's been saying for around the last ten chapters or so - and Jesus' dramatic action when he turned over the tables of the money changers was a sign - warning them of what was about to happen.

Now then - what's so significant about the Temple as a focus for all this? Well for those who are lucky enough to have seen the sight of the Temple in Jerusalem before it was destroyed in 70 AD, this must have been the most beautiful building you could ever imagine - adorned and decorated by the skill and love of hundreds of years - and it had the central place in national life - it was the focal point of the Jewish religion - huge, not just in size,

but in the national pride and imagination. I've only seen the model in Jerusalem in the Israel Museum & it was breathtaking. But even the remains of the temple mount - its base - are magnificent. So for Jesus to say the Temple itself would be torn down would have been met by complete incredulity - and not a little anger.

- So what had happened to Temple worship?
- and why did Jesus feel the need to express God's displeasure with what was going on in such a graphic way?

Well mainly because it had come to stand for all the perverted ways that Jewish society and religion had developed - which had taken the place of its *true* calling - from Abraham onwards - calling to be what? A selfish, self-seeking arrogant nation used to exploiting the poor in order for some to get rich? A nit-picking, rule-bound esoteric religion just for the powerful and pious few? Was *that* Israel's calling? NO - to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth

- clear from Genesis 12 onwards if you want to take a look.

It's no accident that the recent parables and stories we've been getting about Samaritans and widows and tax collectors and Pharisees has Jesus turning the tables on those who thought *they* were the righteous, special ones. I'm not sure whether there's any parallel, but I wonder whether the polarization and disquiet in our nation isn't a reflection of protest against the great and good who seem to have politics stitched up in a way that ignores ordinary people's concerns and struggles.

So let's try and understand just how serious a statement this is from Jesus. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem would be as unthinkable for a devout Jew as it would be for Americans to imagine the destruction of the White House, the Washington Memorial, the Houses of Congress - and the Statue of Liberty - only much more so, because the Temple signified a thousand years of God's dealings with Israel. (Just remember the outrage at the bombing

of the World Trade Center – the Twin Towers, and multiply this exponentially and you’d be getting somewhere close.)

Jesus’ warnings about what his disciples were about to face indicate that he wasn’t going to be with them any longer – at least not physically. And others would come pretending to be him, or to claim to be his spokesperson (and consider all the different self-styled messiahs and cults we’ve had over the years...)

The world would be convulsed with wars and revolutions – and all the more alarming, because they didn’t have satellite TV or internet news coverage, People would hear of such things by rumour from commercial travellers – and would pass on the news with bits added (like Chinese whispers) – until the story of a minor border skirmish had been inflated as all-out war; and an Emperor’s occasional sneeze would’ve been exaggerated into a fatal illness. Some of us can remember back to when the Iron and Bamboo

Curtains were still in place – during the Cold War, when newsreel information had to be taken with a pinch of salt. And the use of misinformation which is still attending the Brexit issue amazes me – on both sides of the argument.

We've been commemorating those who gave their lives for their country today. In the First World War – the Great War that was supposed to be the war to end all wars – there was a message being sent down the trenches which started off as "*Send reinforcements, we're going to advance*" and by the time it had passed from soldier to soldier became "*Send three and fourpence, we're going to a dance*". People can be so very certain of what they saw, or heard – because they just know.

And Jesus clearly expects that amidst these turbulent times, his followers will be misunderstood and marked out as undesirables.

- People would argue that Jesus was someone who led Israel astray – particularly those trying to claw back their power and influence

- And they'd accuse him of deflecting people from keeping the Law - with all this dangerous talk of God's Kingdom - of peace and grace for all - what nonsense!

So it would be down to the New Israel - faithful followers of Jesus the Christ/the Messiah who could expect to be in the firing line. Families would even be split apart; and it would be the Christians who would be blamed - it would be the Christians that everyone would love to hate. If ever they needed patience, they were going to need it then - in shovel-fulls!

Well so much for the threat!! What about the promise? Jesus says: "don't be dismayed when you see all this going on". He says that he will give them what they need: "words and wisdom". Of course it was going to be hard work too - they were going to be on trial for their lives because of their allegiance to Jesus.

And the story of that first generation of Christianity – the years that elapsed between the resurrection of Jesus and the fall of the Temple – because it did all take place in AD 70 – bears out the truth of Jesus’ prophecies. And many early Christians would have testified that Jesus had indeed been with them and given them the words to say and the courage to say them.

But this amazing passage, though vital in its specific reference to first century history, has a great deal to say for us today. Wherever Christians are persecuted for their faith – and sadly, but not surprisingly, this is still very common in many parts of our world (and very subtly in our culture too with recent legislation wanting to restrict Christian preaching and label it as intolerant) – we need to hear Jesus’ words of encouragement and comfort in fresh ways. We need to hear him saying again: “Don’t let anyone deceive you”; “you’ll get a chance to tell your story – and I’ll give you the

words and the wisdom to know how to do that” -
“Just keep things together with *patience* - because even *that* is part of the fruit of my Spirit who lives within you.” These are still precious promises - to be taught, learnt and clung to when the going gets rough - to encourage us today as we seek to push forward in his name and for his glory.