**Paying attention to the signs**

What a topic for the first service Janice and I are taking in Eden after an absence of over 5 months! But, in fairness, I don’t think either Michael or Pat would have known this when developing the roster!

So what do you think? Are we now experiencing the signs that Mark describes?

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Your responses leave me wondering whether we should have delayed our return by a week and so avoided this controversial, and potentially polarising, topic!

Seriously, though, a key question is whether we should interpret all the catastrophic events that we are experiencing firsthand as the signs to which Jesus refers. For there is ‘terror in the air’.

After all we’ve had bushfires, floods, Covid-19, earthquakes (in Melbourne the earth shook for a good minute), military posturing towards China and climate change. Then there is the dreadful political spin coming from the Government that leaves me so ashamed, despondent and angry. Jesus was so right to warn us to beware deceitful leaders: just a few days later there is false testimony is given against Jesus about the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple! Fake news indeed!

That warning also applies as much to our Christian leaders as to our politicians. There has been so much written and preached in the last 100 years about the End Times, Armageddon, the rapture, the Second Coming and a New Heaven and Earth. It makes me so mindful of the sentiment expressed in the phrase ‘*Fools rush in where angels fear to tread*’.

I’m also very aware what the New Testament Scholar, Emeritus Professor Bill Loader, says:

*We lose our way if we make the passage predict the future. Writings of this kind characteristically enter the terror only then to leap into fantasies of hope.*

*The important thing is to be there, in the midst of the terror, to share the vision, to keep the light of love burning, to face the trial without despair.*

So my starting point for gaining insights from this passage is to understand the context within which Jesus’ comments were made. The main point to make here is that the disciples would have been well aware of the links between the fate of the Temple and terrifying ‘end of the world’ scenarios.

The first Temple was built in 957 BCE by Solomon at the height of Israel’s power and status. It housed the Arc of the Covenant, one of the most revered religious symbols of the Jewish faith, and embodied Israel’s Golden Age – nationally and religiously.

This Golden Age, however, was in ruins when the Temple was destroyed in 587 BCE and the Israelites were taken into captivity in Babylon. Very much an ‘end of the world’ scenario for them. 50 years later, however, the Israelites came back to Jerusalem and the Temple was rebuilt. The Arc of the Covenant had been lost, but the rebuilding may have heralded a new dawn for Israel. Maybe, but only for a while.

In 167 BCE the new Temple was desecrated and became the site of a syncretic Pagan-Jewish cult. Jewish religious practices were banned, the Maccabean revolt occurred, the apocalyptic book of Daniel was written, and the Temple was subsequently cleansed. A second new dawn for the Jewish faith? Maybe, but again not a long-term outcome.

In 63 BCE, when Pompey besieged Jerusalem, the Temple was again desecrated, but then in 20 BCE Herod the Great initiated a major expansion of the Temple. This was completed in 26 CE. A third new dawn for the Jewish faith? Again, this was not to be.

I’ll note here, in passing, that the comments by the disciples were made soon after Herod’s new Temple was completed. The disciples must have been so proud of it: *What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!* So they would have been shocked by Jesus’ prediction that every stone would be thrown down. Yet this is what happened just 44 years later.

In 70 CE after the siege of Jerusalem the Temple was destroyed. It was around this time that the Gospel of Mark, the first Gospel, was written. At the time it would have been so tempting for the early church to say:

*Just like Daniel’s prophesies came true with the desecration of the temple by Pompey, so now Jesus’ prophesies are coming true with the Roman destruction of the Temple*.

Would it also have looked forward to a new dawn in faith, with Jesus at its centre? Perhaps this is what Peter, James, John and Andrew had in mind when they asked Jesus, in private, when these things would happen.

When Jesus spoke, the Temple was strongly identified with both the fate of the Jewish nation and terrifying events. By the time Mark’s Gospel was written, the early church would have been fearful of what the Roman occupying forces were going to do, or experiencing the siege of Jerusalem, or reflecting on the destruction of the Temple. Whichever was the case, those hearing this reading would have felt history was repeating itself, with its terrifying consequences. They could well have asked:

*Where is the risen Christ in all this disaster?*

It could have been this question that Mark sought to address when recording Jesus’ words about the Temple’s destruction. He was talking about the ‘here and now’, not fantasising about some future event. His Gospel is so dramatic, so immediate.

Ched Myers, in *Binding the Strong Man*, puts forward the case that the Gospel was written to help disciples of the early church think through whether to side with the Zealots and their rebellion, or with the religious establishment and their closer alignment with the Roman occupiers. To him this was not a story about future events, but about making tough decisions now.

In this regard, a member of my Zoom Bible study group in Frankston recently made a very pertinent remark when speaking about the End Times. She said every generation could point to horrific events which could be interpreted to be signs of the End Times – the white colonisation of Australia; the First World War; the Spanish Flu; the stock market crash; the Second World War; the Holocaust; the Cold War; the GFC; the Twin Towers attack; Covid; Climate Change; and so on. But for her, the issue was not so much “*Are these the End Times?*” as “*How do we live out our Christian faith in challenging times?*”.

So, when I came to read this passage, rather than looking for prophetic insights I asked myself “*What does this passage teach me about living out my life today?*”.

In this regard I exchanged emails with a friend who preached three weeks ago on Jesus healing the blind Bartimaeus. I’ll draw on what he said:

*Bartimaeus is about restoration into mainstream community or renewal, even a 'resurrection life' for one totally excluded. Another reference to this related the concepts within the Bartimaeus story of 'speaking, shouting, calling forth’, to the Genesis creation stories where God 'speaks' or 'calls' creation into being. When Bartimaeus cries out, it is as though creation cries out to be heard and renewed.*

*Is it now up to Christ to respond ... or us, in order to heal and renew this creation which is crying out?*

For me, identifying the 'cry and shout’ of Bartimaeus with the cry and shout of creation for renewal offers important reflection. Is Creation crying out to us for renewal? Or are we more like the crowd telling Creation to be quiet, rather than letting Jesus hear the cries of Creation?

Hold that thought as I now return to today’s story about the destruction of the Temple.

The Temple was one of the most iconic religious symbols for the Jews. The disciples revered it, yet Jesus spoke of its destruction. This would have been so hard for his disciples, for the Temple was so central to the Jewish faith and at the time the disciples would have had no thought of moving outside the Jewish faith. No wonder the disciples questioned Jesus in private about this.

It made me wonder what aspects of our faith are similarly central to us, that we just take for granted. One key element that is becoming more prominent for us today in the light of climate change is God’s Good Creation. We take it for granted, yet when it is under threat from our actions, we can pretend there isn’t a problem, or are reluctant to draw attention to it. We muzzle the cry of Creation:

*We’re just experiencing one of the normal cycles of nature*

*We need the income from coal exports, so won’t reduce our reliance on coal*

*We need the jobs in the coal industry*

*We want cheaper energy*

*And so on*

Should we instead be listening to Creation and what it wants us to do, just as Jesus asked Bartimaeus what Bartimaeus wanted Jesus to do? Or am I just reading into the text my own eco-theological outlook? I don’t think so.

First, the passage is about stones and earthquakes, about the world, as well as wars and famine which are about people. Second, Jesus speaks about the beginning of birth pains. Are these just the birth pains of human salvation or of something much grander, a New Heaven and a New Earth?

I find it so tempting to interpret Jesus’s words just in terms of human destiny, without seeing the bigger picture. And we can treat this story in this way, too. It is so easy to give a human-centred interpretation to what he says, but I suggest in this time of climate change that we should locate it within a broader perspective that goes beyond a focus just on human interest.

Just as Jesus was falsely accused of destroying and then promising to rebuild the Temple in three days, so today there is so much fake news about climate change. Our response, therefore, is not to retreat into a fantasy of hope about the End Times, but to help our community live within, and respond to, the existential crisis it is facing.

Just as Jesus saw the impending destruction of what many regarded as the very cornerstone of the Jewish faith, so today we need to be alert to the potential destruction of God’s Earth and to respond appropriately.

Whether or not the signs we are seeing are of the End Times is a bit of a red herring to me. Two thousand years have passed since Jesus made his comments about the Temple and we are still trying to interpret them!

We are increasingly confronted, however, by the impact of man-made climate change. Like Bartimaeus, is Creation crying out? Are we deaf to these cries? And in response, do we just fantasize about a future world, the Kingdom of Heaven, where evil is banished and we are saved?

I do not know whether climate change is, or isn’t, one of the signs to which Jesus refers. But I do know that we need to pay attention to such signs rather than mouth fantasies of hope about them.

*See these massive stones, these magnificent buildings*, and also see God’s Good Creation all around us. It is just so appropriate to draw attention now to the destruction we are causing the Earth, just as Jesus foreshadowed the destruction of the Temple.

These are the signs we need to heed now, just as the destruction of the Temple was the focus of the passage in Mark. I’ll leave it to others to advise on whether we are in the End Times – for it makes little difference to how I respond to the impact of climate change that is confronting us now!

**AMEN**