

Christ the King, Claremont
25th Sunday after Pentecost 'B'

Sermon by Richard Fuggle
based on Mark 13:1-8

Lord God, I pray that my words and listeners thoughts
will be guided by your Holy Spirit. Amen

In today's Gospel we encounter Jesus teaching in a different way to that which we normally associate with him. He is not using parables, is not talking with or healing village people, he is not speaking comforting words, he is not conforming to his usual public teachings. Instead, he is using another form of ancient Jewish writing and teaching. He used what is termed apocalyptic or 'revelation'. And as the case with teaching through parables, we in the 21st century need to know the purpose of the apocalyptic discourses if we are to understand the message that the teaching would have conveyed to people listening to the words.

The Jewish apocalyptic writings record God's revelations of future events to eminent persons; Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Daniel, and Ezra. These books were not written to predict the future but were intended to be sources of strength and encouragement for the contemporaries of the authors who were experiencing periods of crisis and needed encouragement to face the testing times they were experiencing. Their message was that despite the machinations of wicked men and nations intent on suppressing God's chosen people and denying the existence of their God, God's purpose cannot be thwarted.

I would like to illustrate Jewish apocalyptic writing by reading you a short passage from the Book of Daniel which is the best-preserved example and features in the Old Testament. It is thought to record events in the 14th century before the Christian Era.

Dan 7:1 In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylonia, I had some dreams and visions while I was asleep one night, and I wrote them down. The four winds were stirring up the mighty sea, when suddenly four powerful beasts came out of the sea. Each beast was different.

Dan 7:9 Thrones were set up while I was watching, and the Eternal God took his place. His clothing and his hair were white as snow. His throne was a blazing fire with fiery wheels, and flames were dashing out from all around him. Countless thousands were standing there to serve him. The time of judgment began, and the books were opened. I watched closely to see what would happen. Then before my very eyes, the fourth beast was killed and its body destroyed by fire. The three other beasts had their authority taken from them, but they were allowed to live a while longer.

Dan 7:13 As I continued to watch the vision that night, I saw what looked like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven, and he was presented to the Eternal God. He was crowned king and given power and glory, so that all people of every nation and race would

serve him. He will rule forever, and his kingdom is eternal, never to be destroyed.

Dan 7:15 I was terrified by these visions, and I didn't know what to think. So I asked one of those standing there, and he explained. "The four beasts are four earthly kingdoms. But God Most High will destroy them and give his kingdom to his chosen ones, and it will be theirs forever and ever."

Writings of this sort suggest that after long periods of misery and degradation the final glorious victory of good over evil will be achieved. This type of writing was intended as a morale booster, a 'shot of adrenalin' to bolster the spirit of those close to despair: they were intended to assure that better times lie ahead.

Unfortunately, many of these historical 'revelations', that were intended to encourage people to stand firm against hardship, have often been misinterpreted as being timetables for predicating the end of the world (as happened in the 1970s and again as the year 2000 approached).

Now to return to today's Gospel. To appreciate Jesus' use of the idiom of destruction; war, earthquakes and famine, and his evoking the spectre of 'end times'—the belief that the end of the world is imminent—we need to ask, 'Why'?

The accounts in Mark 13, Matthew 24 and Luke 21 present a collection of sayings relating to the destruction of Jerusalem, and to the 'end of time', they are termed Jesus' 'eschatological discourse'.

Putting Mark 13 into context. Chapters 11 and 12 recount Jesus' negative comments regarding Israel's religious establishment. He curses an unproductive fig tree, a symbol of Israel's unproductive religious system (11:12-14, 20-25), He cleanses the temple (11:15-19) of the corrupt practices that were defiling it. In the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (12:1-12), he recounts Israel's rejection of the prophets and the Son—and prophesies that the vineyard will be taken away from Israel and given to others—and says that the rejected stone will become the cornerstone (12:10). Then we come to today's Gospel passage in which Jesus prophesies the destruction of the temple (13:2)—the destruction of the central focus of Jewish faith: clearly this would suggest to those hearing it that the end of time, the end of the world, was near. This fear is what evoked the disciples' question, "When will this be?"

The events of chapters 11-12 provide the background for Jesus' teachings in chapter 13. The religious system in Israel had become corrupt (chapters 11-12), the Jewish people were being suppressed by the Romans, they were being required to worship Roman emperors and deny their own God. There was despondency that the one promised to save the Jewish people, a messiah, would ever come.

Chapter 13 is a 'pep talk' to boost the spirit of the flagging disciples to whom Jesus addresses today's teaching. The four disciples were thinking of the 'end of the world' when they asked Jesus "when will this happen" (13:4). Jesus gives an answer that would have had one meaning when the disciples first heard it (the destruction of the

temple) and another meaning after they had experienced His crucifixion (the end of His earthly life ushering in a new age).

In his answer Jesus first warns the disciples not to be taken in after His death by people claiming to be the Messiah. He then tells them of the persecution they will face, that they will “hear of wars and rumours of wars” that “nation will go to war against nation, kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in many places; there will be famines. These are the first birth-pangs of the new age.”

If we consider the state of the world during the 20th century, or in 2021, it requires no imagination to see why fundamentalists who believe in the literal truth of the Bible are anticipating Armageddon—the end of the world. But when we read on to verse 32 we find Jesus saying: “about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son; no one but the Father.”

The context of chapter 13 in Mark’s Gospel is that it introduces the Passion narrative (chapters 14-15)—so apart from Jesus’ answer alluding to the destruction of the Temple, He is also referring to the terrible time that his followers will endure immediately following His death, but that this horror will give way to something new and better—resurrection life (chapter 16).

Although directed to His first followers, Jesus’ apocalyptic message is of importance to all Christians, in all times, who suffer difficult circumstances—and don’t we all suffer difficult circumstances?

The central message of today’s Gospel is that God’s purpose cannot be thwarted by human schemes: ultimately good will triumph over evil, but it is not for us to know when this will occur, so we need to keep strong in faith and the belief that love, and peace will eventually prevail, “on earth as it does in Heaven.” Amen