**Sunday Night Theology, The End of the World as We Know It**

Mark 13

Thanks everyone for joining us this evening, I realise this might seem like a strange topic to be thinking about this evening… it might strike some of us as weird and wonderful, it might fascinate us some of us, there may be many of who think of it as irrelevant. Although my guess is that if that’s the case, we wouldn’t have bothered to come…

It was late last year when we were putting together plans for the sermon series on Mark which is coming to a conclusion. And back then I found myself wondering what we would do about Mark 13… this is the chapter which is sometimes referred to as the Olivet Discourse, because Jesus delivers this teaching, as we see in verse 3, on the Mount of Olives. There are other accounts of the same teaching provided for us in Matthew 24 and Luke 21.

And that got me thinking: well, what do we normally do with these passages? It seems to be that the answer is we just ignore them. We come to these portions of Scripture around Easter, we are more preoccupied with the events of Holy Week, I think there is also an extent to which we find them difficult or confusing and so we just gloss over them. I think that’s probably what we do these days, and yet I’m not sure that was always the case.

At the time I was planning this, the topic seemed a little niche, but then things changed… Russia invaded Ukraine in late February, and it was only a few days later that this video was shared online:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/pat-robertson-putin-ukraine-invasion-b2025939.html>

I can still remember a time when I was growing up when there was a lot more talk about the end of the world and the second coming… I have a recollection of sitting in my youth group back in Northern Ireland and listening to recordings of Larry Norman singing ‘I wish we’d all been ready’ and to my youth group leader doing teaching levels where he would explain in great deal about how the end of the world was just around the corner… there would be charts and maps to explain all of this, I can even remember speculation about **Mikhail Gorbachev**, the leader of the Soviet Union, and whether or not his birthmark might actually be the mark of the beast.

It's easy to laugh at this as we look back now, but people were very serious about this stuff, and it reflected a sort of movement within evangelicalism which was preoccupied with this issue.

One of the developments which brought this movement more into the mainstream were the publication books like ***Late Great Planet Earth****,* by Hal Lindsey and the ‘Left Behind’ series. Lindsey’s book was based on dispensationalist theology, beliefs that were famously developed in the 19th century by John Nelson Darby, originally a Church of Ireland minister who then became one of the founding figures of the Plymouth Brethren.

There isn’t time this evening to go into detail about the ins and outs of dispensationalism, but one of the key principles is the idea that history itself is divided into various ages or dispensations. The number of these ages will vary depending on which interpretation you read.

These ages cover the whole sweep of Scripture. For example, there is an age of innocence which runs from creation to the Fall, an age of promise that goes from Abraham to Moses, an age of the Law that goes from Moses to Jesus.

And at the end you have the millennium, a period of a thousand year reign of Christ which ends with the final judgement. There are also conflicting views on where the second coming of Jesus fits with this, pre-millenialists believe it’s before the millennium, post-millenialists think it comes afterwards…

Some of us might be listening to this and thinking that it all seems a bit niche, but we need to grasp just how important and influential it was to some people and still is. It led to a particular obsession with the state of Israel and its establishment in 1948, Lindsey pointed to words in the Olivet discourse, including Mark 13:28-29, and said that Jesus’ return would be within one generation of the establishment of Israel. He said that a biblical term was 40 years, which led to a lot of his readers being convinced the world would end in 1988.

One of my favourite stories from this time is to do with the publication of a book by a man called Edgar C Whisenant, a NASA engineer turned bible scholar. The book was called ***88 Reasons why the Rapture is in 1988.***

When the rapture didn’t happen as predicted, he followed up with another book called *89 Reasons why Christ will return in 1989*, but it didn’t sell as well!

But then a time came when we seemed to move on from all of this stuff, when it wasn’t being talked about anymore. I wonder why this was… I’m sure that one major reason was **the end of the Cold War** that came with fall of Communist governments in 1989. That seemed to remove the threat of nuclear war that many of us had lived with for so long. The American academic Francis Fukuyama famously wrote a book in 1992 called *The End of History and the Last Man* which argued that struggles between political ideologies had come to an end, that the values of western democracies had triumphed, that we were all set for a period of calm and prosperity.

And maybe it seemed like that in the 1990s, but I’m sure we would all agree that the events of recent years have disabused us of that idea and shaken us out of any sense of complacency we might have had. We’ve had ‘wars and rumours of wars’ to use the language Jesus uses here.

* We’ve had 9/11 and then subsequent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, there has been a terrible civil war in Syria, revolutions in places like Libya, which have caused dreadful suffering and led to unprecedented movements of people across continents.
* We have the emergence of what feels like a particularly sinister form of politics, ‘post-truth,’ we live now in the era of fake news, a form of politics most famously exemplified by the Trump presidency but which hasn’t gone away.
* We have lived through two years of a pandemic.
* We have are now seeing the most significant war in Europe since World War 2, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
* One of the consequences of that war has been to make us aware of the fragility of our energy supplies and food… no more sunflower oil!, and that in turn is linked to the perilous state of the environment.

My aim in listing off all of these things is not because I want to be a prophet of doom, but I do think we need to acknowledge all of these events and we do need to grapple with them. It seems to me that as disciples of Jesus, one of the things we ought to be doing in any situation is to ask ourselves: how does Jesus want us to respond to what is happening around us? How does he want us to live, how does he want us to relate to the people around us in times of change and upheaval?

I don’t think he wants us to turn away… that is one of the temptations, when the suffering and trauma on our TV screens is so great that we feel we can’t take any more of it.

But nor do I think he wants us to obsess over it and go into conspiracy theorist mode. Instead, I want to suggest that there is another way that we find in Mark 13.

What I want to do is take some time now to explore what Jesus says here, to provide an overview of it, and then to spend some time at the end offering suggestions about how we might respond to it.

We can break this passage down into a couple of sections, firstly,

**Mark 13:1-4: Jesus predicts the Temple’s Destruction**

So… we have here this short account of Jesus and the disciples leaving the Temple, a place of such importance and significance, and incredible splendour, it is hard to find words which convey just how important this building is to the Jews of Jesus’ day. The temple was sometimes known as **Herod’s Temple** because of the investment he had made in expanding it. It wasn’t just one building, one place of worship, the Temple itself was at the centre of a whole complex of courtyards and other places where trading took place. The total area it covered was 36 acres… or 24 football pitches… it’s vast and it’s grand, it is astonishingly impressive, and it matters not just because of its scale or how impressive the architecture is, it is also the focal point of worship for the Jewish people, it is the place where heaven meets earth.

And Jesus looks at it and says, ‘Do you see all of this? It will all be destroyed, not one stone will be left on top of another?’

It is very hard to imagine a modern analogy to this. Try standing on Capitol Hill in Washington and telling people that all the buildings there will be destroyed… even that doesn’t get close, because those buildings are representative of power but not a holy site. Maybe the closest we could get would be to stand outside the Vatican and predict its demise. This would be to speak of ‘the end of the world as we know it.’

This is a building which would have given a sense of reassurance and hope to the Jewish people… even though they were occupied by Rome, even though they were under the oppression of the Empire they still had the Temple… they still had this symbol of God’s abiding presence with them.

There are some commentators who see in these words of Jesus a similarity to the prophecy of Jeremiah… before the invasion of Babylon, Jeremiah warned people not to place a false hope in the enduring presence of the Temple:

**Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!”**

**Jeremiah 7:4**

And here is Jesus offering a similar warning – don’t presume that all of this will always be here.

And Jesus was proved right. In 66AD, the Jewish people rebelled against Rome, that began what is sometimes referred to as the First Jewish-Roman war and it led to the Romans capturing Jerusalem and destroying the Temple in 70AD.

We’ll come back to this later, but let’s move on…

**Mark 13:5-23: How to be discerning in times of tribulation**

There’s lots going on in these verses, how can we pick a way through it. Let’s try and summarises the key things Jesus says here:

1. **A lot of things are going to happen that will be pointers to the destruction of the Temple but beware of people who come along who will claim special, secret knowledge of what will happen.** Don’t be taken in by those who say they have an inside track on these events.
2. **There will be upheaval leading up to the destruction of the Temple but you need to understand that these are not signs of the end times.** Look at verse 7: ‘Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.’ It’s also telling that, with regard to all of this, Jesus says, ‘Do not be alarmed.’ It seems to me that part of what he is saying here is: ‘Stay calm.’ There are always going to be wars and conflict of some kind, but try to remain level-headed. He speaks of these events as ‘the beginning of birth pains,’ of the upheaval which will occur as the old order of things gives way, but this does not mean the end is about to come.
3. **Followers of Jesus are going to continue to bear witness to him in a fallen world.** That means living in a world where there is conflict, where there is war, where there is famine… when you think about it you could apply that description to our present time, but you could also apply it to any century, any period in history over the last 2,000 years. A further implication of bearing witness to Jesus in the midst of this chaos and disorder will be that his followers will face persecution. ‘You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues.’ And we can see in these words a prediction of what was experienced by the early church, but we can also see a description of what is going on right now across the world where many followers of Jesus are still facing persecution.
4. **Jesus’ followers will face persecution but God will be with them and us, and God will protect them and us.** When we are on trial, God will give us the words we need. And even though people hate them, even though they might be betrayed, still Jesus will see us through. Verse 13: ‘… the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.’ There is language here similar to the promises Jesus gives to the seven churches to whom letters are written in Revelation. Jesus will reward those who overcome…
5. All of this means that **the followers of Jesus need to be in a state of readiness.** We’re now coming to some of the most obscure words in this whole passage, what Jesus says in verse 14 about “the abomination that causes desolation.” These are words which are particularly hard to make sense of because they appear to look backwards. There are a couple of verses in Daniel (9:27, 11:31 and 12:11) where this phrase is used to describe something terrible that will happen within the Temple itself. It was taken by Jews to refer to events that then took place in 167BC, when the Greek leader Antiochus Epiphanes erected a pagan altar in the Temple. Jesus, however, seems to suggest that something similar could happen in the future. What we do know is that shortly before the Temple was destroyed in 70AD, during the war, there was all manner of chaos there, there were Jewish freedom fighters, Zealots, in charge, ruling over the Temple precinct like a bunch of vigilantes.

There are some experts who believe Mark wrote his gospel in the late 60s, so around the time when all of this was happening. If that’s the case, then that would explain this phrase which we see in verse 14, ‘let the reader understand.’ This could be Mark’s thinly coded way of saying: pay attention, look at the bad stuff which is going down right now and don’t get involved with it. When you see trouble kicking off in Jerusalem, you need to get out of town. Don’t get drawn into the schemes of the Jewish rebels, they don’t stand a chance of winning. Don’t trust that God is going to come to the rescue of earthly buildings and institutions.

And then this section finishes with another warning to be alert, another warning which sums up many of the things Jesus has already said. The commentator Tim Gombis provides this very helpful summary of what Jesus is saying:

The destruction of Jerusalem is not the sign of the coming of the Son of Man. Moreover, upheavals during the present age are not signs of Jesus’ return. These are the ways that the present age *must* work out. It is going to be a time of distress that will see the rise and fall of the nations and the growth and destruction of earthly institutions. While wars, famines, and economic hardships all cause great anxiety during this age, faithful disciples are not to read these as signs of the end of history. Such false messengers may be so convincing that they could even have led astray God’s elect, if that were possible (v22). The church will need to exercise great caution and extreme discernment in order to remain faithful to its mission in the present age amid the great upheaval that will characterise it.

Tim Gombis, *The Story of God Commentary: The Gospel of Mark*

Let’s take time now to look briefly at what happens in the rest of the chapter:

**Mark 13:24-27: The Coming of the Son of Man**

So… Jesus has been talking up to now about the upheaval which will mark the current age, but verse 24 seems to indicate a transition point. ‘But in those days, following that distress…’

Jesus speaks here about the coming of the Son of Man, which is, of course, a phrase he has used to refer to himself throughout the Gospel. He talks in very dramatic terms of what will happen when he is about to return… the sun will be darkened… the stars will fall from the sky…,’ there will be a massive upheaval of the whole of the created order.

And at this time Jesus will gather all his followers from the ends of the earth to himself.

There are prophesies in the Old Testament that speak of the nations being drawn to Zion. Think, for example, about what Isaiah says:

**In the last days
the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.**

**Isaiah 2:2**

But here we have Jesus speaking of the fulfilment of this promise in new and surprising ways. The physical Temple, the building in Jerusalem, has been destroyed, but Jesus himself is now the new Temple, Jesus is calling all his followers to himself.

Just a brief comment on **verses 28-31.** We find Jesus speaking of the fig tree, this is a reference back to Mark 11:13-20, where Jesus curses a fig tree, and speaks of it as never bearing fruit again. It may seem like a strange episode to us, but in the symbolism that Jews of this time would be familiar with, the fig tree was seen as representing the Temple. Jesus is effectively saying the Temple itself will not bear fruit again.

Jesus returns to the fig tree image, and he says that when you see leaves appearing on a fig tree you know that the summer is near. He also says, in verse 28, ‘when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.’ There are some who think that this is his way of speaking again about how the Temple will be destroyed. When you start to see violence in Jerusalem, you have to understand that this is a sign of how the destruction of the Temple itself is just around the corner.

And then the chapter ends with these words:

**Mark 13:32-37, The Parable of the Watchman**

And again we have a reflection here of how this chapter can be hard to make sense of it because it seems to zigzag between various events – you have the bits which refer to the destruction of the Temple, you have bits which refer to the chaos and upheaval which we will always see while we live in a fallen world, and then you have the moments when Jesus talks about his second coming. And that’s what he’s doing at the end, he offers this parable about a man who goes away, and leaves his servants in charge, and speaks about the need for them to be in a state of constant readiness, be ready for when they will return.

Again, we have these commands to ‘Be on guard’ and ‘Be alert’ in verse 33. But again, it’s worth clarifying what Jesus is saying here. He is not saying: ‘read the signs and try to work out when I will return!’ Instead, he is saying, you need to be in a state of constant readiness. Whatever you do, as my church, make sure you don’t fall asleep, don’t allow yourself to be lulled into a state of complacency.

Now… that is a whistle-stop tour of 37 verses, I hope we’ve managed to do some justice to the sheer complexity of the issues we find here, but then we face the other question of ‘So what!’

How are we to actually apply Jesus’ teaching here to our lives in 2022?

Let me offer a three suggestions.

**Let’s not get distracted by world events and speculation over them**

As I was saying earlier, for some in the church the issue of the end times and when Jesus is coming back has always held a certain fascination, there are some people who love nothing better than doing this. Think back to that Pat Robertson video, which appeared the very moment Russia invaded Ukraine…

When I watched that, I found myself thinking: we never learn! I am constantly amazed by how, in spite of the warnings Jesus makes about not speculating in this way, and in spite of the fact that so many people have got egg on their face for predicting things that don’t come to pass, there will always be people who do that very thing… how is this so? Why is that certain leaders want to play this card, want to make claims to special knowledge, to insider information – they come across as not dissimilar to the gnostics of the early church, who claimed to have special knowledge. But perhaps one reason for their success is that we fall for this, we lap this stuff up… it appears that there has always been an audience out there which is willing to fall for these sorts of theories.

Why is this is so? I wonder if sometimes we find it easier to fall for what people present to us as hard facts than it is to admit that we don’t understand what is happening around us but to keep on trusting God anyway.

An important point about this sort of speculation is one which has been made by the American New Testament scholar Michael Gorman, who has written about the dangers of the Left Behind series and similar writings. He points out that this sort of speculation does not lead to people trusting God more, if anything it does the exact opposite – it leads us to be suspicious, to read danger signs into all manner of events, to be on the lookout for coded warnings of the second coming. And he also talks about how it becomes a distraction from the things we really ought to be focussed on. If I am preoccupied with when Jesus will return and I will rise up to meet him, I am not going to be as concerned with loving my neighbours, with investing in relationships in the present,

Secondly, l**et’s think about what and who we’re trusting in**

It’s worth thinking back again to the very start of the passage. Remember that account we have of the disciples looking at the Temple in all its grandeur and saying, **“Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” (Mark 13:1).**

And of course Jesus reply is his warning to them that one day it will all be gone, one day none of this will be standing. And so it’s challenging for us to think about this and consider what we might be investing in and trusting in, and also what methods we are resorting to?

In verse 14, which as I said earlier, seems to be a reference to the Jewish revolt, there is a warning that when the violence begins, ‘those who are in Judea should flee to the mountains.’ There are some commentators who have suggested, and I think they’re right to do so, that this may well be a warning to Jesus’ followers not to get involved in violence against the Empire. In this regard, it’s worth noting that the revolt was a disaster, it ended up bringing terrible suffering for the Jewish people…

But what does all of this mean for us now?

I think it’s fair to say that there have been more pronounced and more serious issues in the United States, where the evangelical movement have allowed themselves to be increasingly drawn into political agendas, where some church leaders will do anything to have the ear of the President or other politicians. As I’ve said before, when the history of the Trump presidency is written, it will have the evangelicals in it left, right and centre and they will not come of it well.

It's easy for us to be critical of this, but we have a similar history, it’s just a little bit further removed… there was a time when the missionary movement of the UK church was innately linked to the British empire and its spread around the world. There was a sense in which British evangelicals felt that God had given a special power and prominence to the Empire which made Britain God’s elect nation. And we now know that what may have seemed compelling and a providential blessing back then now seems more troubling, it’s something we rightly feel more rueful about.

Another point which writers on mission have made is that we are now in an era which could be described as ‘Post-Christendom.’

In this scenario, ‘Christendom’ is a word used to describe a culture where not everyone is Christian but the world itself is ordered or shaped along Christian lines – in terms of the laws, of society’s values etc. We may feel that the church is waning in influence but it still has a lot of privilege. There are still bishops in the House of Lords, the established church itself still has a lot of wealth and buildings.

We might also care to reflect on what this means for us as Baptists. We need to realistic and acknowledge that we may well be moving into a different era when our levels of resources… of giving especially, may not support the models of church and ministry we’ve been used to with our inherited model of church. Remember these words of Jesus are delivered to a movement on the margins, not a movement who presumed they would hold political power…

And all of this raises questions about what we’ve been relying on, investing in, how do we measure success? Are we open to a future where we may be travelling lighter, where we may be more on the margins but also a more missional movement? And then a final suggestion

**Let’s stay awake**

There are commandments from Jesus throughout this passage to be watchful and alert, and especially near the end we have this warning, in the form of a parable, about how we don’t know when the owner of the house will come back – it could be at any time of day, Jesus says, but the last thing you want is for him to find us sleeping. There, of course, many parallels with Matthew 25.

And, of course, this raises the question of what it looks like to be awake. And I think this overall passage gives us some important clues – to be awake does not mean to be distracted, to be studying the newspapers and reading the runes and getting out our biblical prophecy handbooks to try to decode what’s going on.

Instead, to be awake means to get on with being the church and doing the things Jesus has called us to do – it means preaching the gospel, it means proclaiming a message of hope to the world that points beyond the suffering of the here and now, it means healing the sick, feeding the poor, committing our lives to the service of others and offering a welcome to those who marginalised. It means ‘to be busy,’ to come back to that line from the Pope that we talked about this morning.

And I also wonder if there if there is a call here not just to be faithful in mission, but also faithful in the midst of suffering and upheaval. Think again about where this passage fits in the overall context of Mark, think of chapter 14 and how Jesus asks the disciples to keep watch with him while he prays but how they fall asleep. This is what one commentator, Ched Myers says:

**In Mark’s story time, the tragedy is that the disciples in that episode will not “stay awake” with Jesus in Gethsemane; they will sleep. They will betray and finally abandon him at each “watch” of his final night because they do not understand his call to the cross. Yet this call to vigilance is primarily directed toward the historical existence of the reader… The discipleship community is exhorted to embrace the world as Gethsemane: to stay awake in the darkness of history, to refuse to compromise the politics of the cross.**

**Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man***

**Discussion questions:**

1. Can you think of ways in which the church is becoming distracted or putting its trust in the wrong things, as Jesus warns against?
2. In light of this teaching of Jesus, how does change your view of how best we can witness to Him in the midst of the chaos we see in our world?

Prayers, including for Ukraine