

REFLECTION *This end is the beginning*

In Jesus day, the temple was the main place for Jews to congregate and worship on important religious holidays. The synagogue, on the other hand, was the place where people would regularly gather for the reading of the Law. Jesus appears to have been a frequent attendee of the local synagogue and there are a number of accounts of Jesus teaching in the synagogue.

Just like today when the big cities have their magnificent cathedrals in the centre of the city, and smaller churches dotted around the suburbs.

Jesus has been on a somewhat roundabout journey with his disciples but his destination was always Jerusalem. Here he is walking out of the Temple when one of the disciples, somewhat strangely, remarks on the magnificent buildings.

And Jesus somewhat ominously replies,

This will all end! Not one stone will be left here upon another..

Well, this is the end of the church's year, the end of the world's year, and Jesus makes what has been called an apocalyptic prophesy. This is not the way Jesus usually spoke. To be clear, Jesus is not making predictions about the future; he's speaking of the precariousness of the present –

this temple, this world... is not as stable and eternal as it may appear.

THE TEMPLE

The First Temple was built in 957 BC by King Solomon after King David conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital. The Temple was destroyed in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon when he in turn conquered Jerusalem. The destruction of the temple was followed by the deportation of Jews to Babylonia.

Cyrus II, founder of the Achaemenian dynasty of Persia and conqueror of Babylonia, in 538 BC issued an order allowing exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. The Second Temple was constructed as a modest version of the original building with work completed in 515 BC.

The rebuilding of the Second Temple was begun by Herod the Great, king of Judea. Construction began in 20 BC and lasted for 46 years. The Second Temple was destroyed in 70 AD during the First Jewish-Roman War.

All that remained was a portion of the Western Wall (or Wailing Wall). This was made part of the wall surrounding the Muslim Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque build in 691 AD and returned to Jewish control in 1967.

We might compare the Jerusalem Temple with some of the great cathedrals of Europe, the construction of which often took decades. Like the Jerusalem Temple, some of these huge structures have also been destroyed. Witness in our lifetime, the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, which caught fire in April 2019. The fire destroyed the spire and most of the roof as well as severely damaging the interior. After 5 years of work, the cathedral is scheduled to reopen in early December 2024.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mark writes his gospel based around the fall of Jerusalem. He wrote, scholars believe, during, or just after that last hopeless war that resulted in the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

Our story begins with an allusion to that war.

Jesus looks at this mighty structure, the Jerusalem Temple, and says,

Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.

Mark's listeners would know about the destruction of the Temple or at least recognise what this prediction was referring to.

When Jesus stands before the high priest, false testimony will allege that Jesus had claimed he would himself destroy the temple:

I will destroy this temple made with hands and in three days build another not made with hands

We know that Jesus was not referring to the Jerusalem Temple.

Jesus was not the first to predict the temple's destruction. Jeremiah had also done so. The temple was always going to be vulnerable should unrest come to Judea. And the middle decades of the first century AD were decades of unrest. Does that not sound a lot like our times...

Flavius Josephus, a Roman–Jewish historian, tells us that the mid-first century AD saw many different figures promising hope, instigating movements for liberation, culminating in the great revolt. These would have been difficult times for Christian communities who were many of the strongly Jewish. The openness of some of them to Gentiles would have raised the ire

of their more conservative counterparts. It seems it has always been and always will be that way, this intransigence between liberals and conservatives. Some Christian Jews retreated from Jerusalem at the start of the revolt. Were there also some who joined the revolt or who saw God's hand in the movement to resist the Romans? We do not know.

JESUS' PROPHECY

Jesus tells the disciples to be aware and to watch out for those who will try to take the name of Christ and lead the disciples astray.

In 13:5, Mark has Jesus declare that there will be people who could lead them astray, offering false hopes, perhaps calling for military engagement, perhaps promising victory.

In 13:6 is the prediction that many will claim to speak with Christ's voice, maybe even claiming to be the returned messiah. Popular expectation of a messiah who would save the people fed the misinformation which killed Jesus – labelled “King of the Jews”, “revolutionary leader”...

Peter, James, John and Andrew are asking Jesus in private about the signs of the coming Kingdom of God and how they will know that all the things Jesus has been talking about will be accomplished. Remember, Jesus had announced good news for the poor, for destitute Israel, a new Kingdom of God, etc.

Mark 13:7-8 employs the language found in similar situations of danger: nations rising up against nations, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines. They were standard literary descriptions of disasters which would precede the end of time.

Let me reiterate, this passage is not about predicting the future.

Here we are two thousand years later and defiant hope remains. Our world is wrought with earthquakes and famines, catastrophic floods, nation rising up against nation.

Now I am one of the oldest Baby Boomers around - those people lucky to have been born after the end of World War II. But I could hardly say I have not lived in times of war. We have had the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Afghanistan War, numerous wars in the Middle East, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's usurpation of Hong Kong and Mongolia, and the South China Sea - the list goes on and on.

Wars, rumours of wars, nation against nation, earthquake, famine, flood...

But Jesus said,

when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed...this is but the beginning of the birthpangs

To finish, let me quote from two of my favourite people.

William Loader says,

Sometimes the voice of Christ will sound clearly and we will know what we have to do. Sometimes we are filled with despair. The important thing is to be there, to share the vision, to keep the light of love burning, to face the trial without despair

Andrew Prior says

Real faith is to trust God to still be there, somehow, in the end, even after we have been utterly destroyed, even after we have given up, even after we have lost everything, even when we failed, and were not true to him.

Then, back in Galilee, on the road, living like Jesus would live, we will find he has gone before us.

He is still there, God still is, and we are still loved.

This passage is about two questions.

- One concerning the destruction of Jerusalem
- The other concerning the end of the world

But Jesus says,

...this end is the beginning.

Only a living God can make the end the beginning

AMEN.