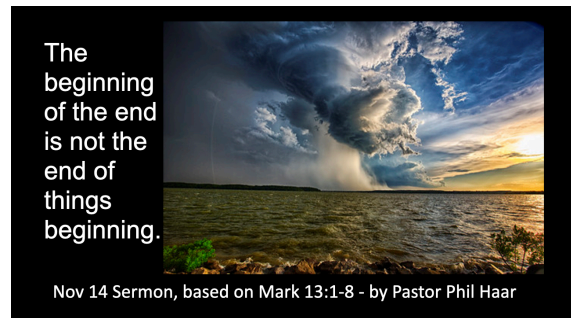


The Beginning of the End is Not the End of Things Beginning

Mark 13:1- 8

As we read the end-of-year readings, our thoughts turn to the end of the world. What is a natural curiosity for some becomes, for others, a strong (even obsessive) need to know what lies ahead, and how to protect oneself. The temptation is to speculate, and to come up with theories, with biblical foundations to support them, concerning the when, how and who of these future events, even though scripture clearly says these are not ours to know.



Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem, and his disciples understandably are shocked. They have just expressed wonder at the beauty and permanence of the building which held such a central place in the hearts, minds and spiritual orientation of the nation. The thought that this Godly-approved building with its huge stones would be destroyed was unthinkable. Such a tragedy would seem like the end of the world.

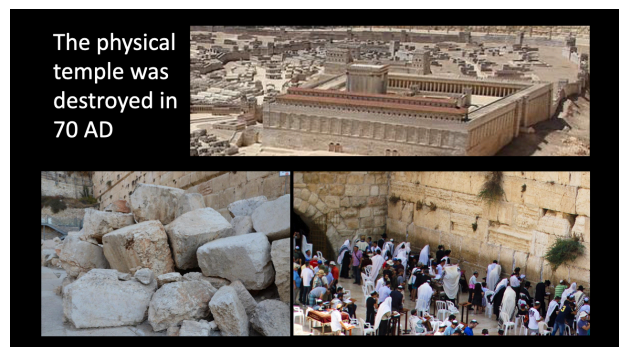
History shows that Jesus was correct, for in

70AD the temple was destroyed by the Romans and never rebuilt. The temple mount eventually became a Muslim holy site.

But although it may have been the beginning of the end, it was not the end of new beginnings.

The temple of Jerusalem was the centre of worship and the cultural identity of the nation, despite it being a lesser version of the original built by Solomon. Today a section of its foundation's retaining wall, known as the Wailing Wall, is the holiest site of Judaism. Above it, Temple Mount is occupied by the Dome of the Rock built, from 685-691AD over the rock that Islam believes to be the site where the prophet Mohammed was taken up to heaven. Also holy for Judaism, it is the site where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac.

In our text, the disciples understandably want to know when the temple's destruction would happen. Wouldn't we like to know the time of events leading to the last day when Jesus will return in glory? Jesus doesn't answer the question of when, but tells his disciples what to look for. To




those left in charge of his 'house', he speaks words that bring comfort to them in their chaos and fear. He encourages and strengthens in them their courage, alertness and stickability to the end. The 'when' is not as important as is the 'how' we are to live our faith.

Jesus assures us that, just as we are able to observe the changes in seasons by the flowering and fruiting of a fig tree, we will perceive when the day of judgement is near. But in the meantime, even major horrific events are not to frighten us. Earthquakes, wars and rumours of wars, floods and famines, are but the beginning of kingdom birth pains.

Jesus gives us the image of a birthing process. Birth involves pain and distress, but such pains come with a promise of new life, something beautiful and longed for. Birth pains can be celebrated, as new life is getting closer to hand. Our focus is not to be on endings, but on the birth of new things. This isn't the language of fear, but of hope. Jesus doesn't terrify, or burden consciences with threats of fiery destruction. No, instead he calls us to not be distracted or deceived from living out our faith in him, or serving others in love.

Earthquakes, wars and rumours of wars, floods and famines, Jesus says, are but the beginning of kingdom birth pains. The beginning of the end is not the end of things beginning.



As each day passes, we are surely getting closer to the end times and to that last day. Whether we are the generation to see Jesus arrive in the clouds or not, we are called to not fear.



God has always preserved his own, even if his people experience the worst of global warming, droughts, famines, financial collapses, ungodliness and epidemics of worldly proportions. On experiencing that 'the day' is close, with eyes open and ears tuned to truth, God's people will reject false teachers and prophets, because Jesus warns them to be alert.

Just as he directed the attention of his disciples away from the destruction of the Temple to living in the end

times, he told them, "See to it that no one leads you astray" (verse 5). "Be aware that you will be persecuted" (verse 9). "Above all, keep awake and alert."

Terrible events will occur that will threaten to distract you from your faith walk. The rug of security may be ripped away, and you will ask all kinds of questions in your fear. May our eyes and ears be focussed on Jesus' words, and not captivated or frozen with fear by the signs that we see in our lifetime. We've already seen much in the last two decades.

November 11, 2001, aircraft fly into the twin towers in New York, and a season of fear and retribution seizes our world. December 26, 2004, a magnitude 9.1 earthquake, off the west coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, triggered a massive tsunami. This disaster killed nearly 230,000 people in multiple countries. Another tsunami in 2018 killed more than 4000 people.



Global warming continues to cause changes in weather and is the cause of polar-ice melt, rising sea levels and heatwaves, many resulting in deaths, coral reef bleaching, and bushfires destroying dwindling areas of natural habitat, as well as the loss of human homes and infrastructure.

Humans need to adjust the way we consume earthly resources and add to rising carbon emissions and global warming; but regardless of our efforts the world has a day in its future set by God and his return.

Today I'm wearing a multi-coloured scarf knitted for me by a Christian lady very aware of the rise in annual temperatures. This scarf is actually a data record of the changes in annual temperature of our continent. It is part of an initiative for visualisation of climate change. For more information, see: https://www.commongrace.org.au/knit_for_climate_action



As Christians, we are to preserve the lives and livelihood of our neighbours, and to care for the earth as good stewards of what God has entrusted us. We are to be concerned for the environment, as well as for the message of the Gospel and for other peoples' eternal good.

How will we act? Will we hold on to faith in the events of the future? Will future generations remember us for our disregard for the environment? Or will our holding to the faith and practising our freedom to serve God and others be also displayed in our caring for the earth?

I am certain of one thing that won't change, whatever the outlook: our future is in God's hands. Just as God provided for us in the past by giving us Jesus Christ as our Saviour, so God will provide for our faith in the future. It doesn't mean that things will stay the same as they were in the past, nor does it protect us from change. But it does mean that God will not abandon us. God's promises always hold true, and our faith and our freedom are assured, whatever life in this world may hold.

'I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Romans 8:38, 39

So as we prepare for 2022, which, God willing, is just over the horizon, I share St Paul's confidence in our future: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Rom 8:38,39

Holy Spirit, keep our hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus 'til he comes again. Amen.

Video of the service including the above sermon: <https://youtu.be/jBcBwAxujSU>