

Followers of the Way

Victory complete, the second coming

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Mark 13:14-36; Revelation 7:13-17

Let us not be in any doubt. Jesus *will* return in glory. We know that because Jesus told the disciples He would, just as He told them, before the crucifixion, that three days after His death He would rise from the dead: Mark 9:31 He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But while Jesus said He would return, he also, of course, said that the hour of that return is known only to God. Which has caused endless expectation and speculation ever since!

But what are we to expect when Jesus does return? Our reading from Mark this morning graphically spells something out ... but the question is, what? '... when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be, then those in Judea must flee to the mountains ...' etc. We assume this indicates something indescribably sacrilegious being set up in the Temple – but what? In 167 BC, Antiochus Epiphanies had already desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar to Zeus, generally thought to be a fulfilment of the prophecy in Daniel 11:31 "Forces sent by him shall occupy and profane the temple and fortress. They shall abolish the regular burnt offering and set up the abomination that makes desolate.' But Jesus' words are future, and seem to imply something infinitely worse. Something cataclysmic that sends out waves of desolation, causing suffering the like of which has never before been seen. It will bring something so bad, Jesus says, that if the Lord hadn't shortened the days immediately following, no one could be saved. And ahead of His coming, He then prophesies what can be described only as a kind of celestial disturbance that sends shock waves throughout the whole of creation.

In fact, Jesus' words resonate strongly with the opening of the sixth seal by the lamb in Revelation 6:12-17: 'I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood.' Words explicitly foretelling the coming of the lamb in wrath ... the day of the Lord, when the account with evil will be finally settled.

Well, we can of course speculate what all this might mean, but the truth is we just won't know, until it happens. But that said, world events and the downward spiral into chaos of the last few years would seem to suggest that Christ's return is a lot nearer than we had all assumed, even just a decade ago. Perhaps the more pressing question we need to ask this morning, however, is why such a cataclysmic ending to life, as we know it, is foretold in the first place? What's God doing here? What's His purpose ...? In the lead up to the Lord's return, what can we expect?

Well, we know that from the start, when first Eve, and then Adam, succumbed to temptation and ate the forbidden fruit, putting all of mankind under bondage to sin ... we know that from that moment God began to plan how to win us back. From the first, He knew that we wouldn't be able to break free by ourselves. Individual men and women might try to lead good lives – they might even try to overcome sin and reconnect with the transcendent ... we see that, for example, in the goal and aspiration of some religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. But, by ourselves, God knew that we would never be able to bridge the gulf that had opened up. He knew that we would remain eternally separate from Himself, and less than He had made us to be. We would be slaves.

The Bible is then a history – a record – of that plan for our redemption, and it took a long time, in our terms ... in the material ... for God to get everything into place, and prepare the right conditions for Him to be able to send His Son. The Son who He knew was the only one capable of going head-to-head with evil and breaking Satan's hold, so that men and women might be restored to that relationship with Himself for which we had been created.

So right from the beginning of our 'exile', we read how God nonetheless worked to protect Adam and Eve. When the pair were expelled from the garden, for example, we read, '... the Lord God made garments of skin for the man and for his wife, and clothed them' (Genesis 3:21). By no stretch of the imagination was this the act of a vengeful God, throwing them out in fury at their disobedience. Rather, He knew they were going to have a rough time, so He tried to prepare them, and we know that He continued to keep a close eye on them, and even to speak to them – when Cain was angry because God rejected his sacrifice, for instance, God told him directly to try again and warned the young man not give way to sin (Genesis 4:3-7).

As time went on, we discover how God selected the Jews to be the special nation He'd chosen to implement His plan, and how He took them to the Promised Land. But to be used as God wanted, first He had to prepare them, which meant that while they were still spiritually far off, He had to reveal Himself to them, and then He had to teach them exactly who He was, and the need for holiness. And, let's face it, they were a bit slow to learn, because time and again, despite all the mighty signs of deliverance and favour shown them by God, we read that they disobeyed His commands. They worshipped foreign gods, they sacrificed their children to Moloch, they made treaties with foreign powers in direct disobedience to God's command through the prophets, etc, etc ... and so they were punished ... with invasion, plague, drought, famine. Ultimately, of course, in 586 BC the temple was destroyed and the people were taken into exile in Babylon. And that did teach them a lesson. From that moment on, Israel would never again worship foreign gods.

So was God being horrible and vengeful? No, He wasn't. He was being faithful and preparing them for the redemption of the whole of creation. For that to happen, it was imperative they understood the reality of the spiritual battle that was being fought, and their need for holiness. Throughout, as encouragement, God told them what He was going to do – not the full version, because they wouldn't have understood, but enough for them to keep faith and carry on. In Isaiah 7:14, for instance, the prophet says, '... the

Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.' Which, at the right time, was precisely what happened, when Mary gave birth in a stable in Nazareth to Jesus.

Throughout human history, God has been faithful. To win us back and break Satan's hold, He has always known there could be no compromise with evil, but that is something we have had to learn, often painfully. It is something we are still learning, and in the last years evil has grown very strong, as we have listened to the lies and become more intent on having our own way and of being in control. In fact, evil has grown – it's become engorged – on the back of our rebellion and disobedience, so much so that it's once again challenging God, asserting a right to control (and evil is very legalistic) *because* of our worship. But whatever may seem to be happening, God is in control and He will not allow evil to triumph. What we are witnessing in the world now, and in our own country, are signs of His approach and the coming judgment.

So on God's part, the Bible is a story of unfolding and unwavering love, and of complete faithfulness. Our God is a God who is true, and who can be trusted 100%. The decisive battle to win us back was fought on the Cross by Jesus, God's own Son – fully man and fully God. Yet in God's love, a time of dispensation has been allowed for everyone to hear the good news and be given chance to repent. When that time is complete, evil will be dealt with once and for all, and Satan and his hordes – which includes everyone who's given him allegiance – will be consigned to the lake of fire. Which brings us back to Jesus' promise that He will return, in glory, to judge the living and the dead, and that all those who have held to Him in life will be with Him thereafter in heaven.

That is when the victory will be complete, and it is perhaps that – the final reckoning, when evil will be finally and forever be cast out and destroyed – that we are building up to today. Certainly, the times are very frightening, but as Jesus says, the time of His return is known only to God, so at one level, whether we are now seeing fulfilment of prophecies of the second coming or not is immaterial. What matters is that we stay alert and faithful, and that, in love, but without compromise, we not just hold to, but proclaim, the truth. And because God is faithful, we can trust Jesus in His promise to bring us safely home, to the place that He has already prepared for us.