

*As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' <sup>2</sup>Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'*

*"This was the end which Jerusalem came to by the madness of those that were for innovations; a city otherwise of great magnificence, and of mighty fame among all mankind. And truly, the very view itself was a melancholy thing; for those places which were adorned with trees and pleasant gardens, were now become desolate country every way, and its trees were all cut down. Nor could any foreigner that had formerly seen Judaea and the most beautiful suburbs of the city, and now saw it as a desert, but lament and mourn sadly at so great a change. For the war had laid all signs of beauty quite waste.<sup>1</sup>"*

That was the end of the story we visit today, described for us there by the historian Josephus, and it happened in AD70 a few decades after the death of Christ. After the Zealots had got their own way and revolted against Rome, the Emperor Titus brought his legions, surrounded the city, and besieged it. (One very clever move on his part was that when Pilgrims turned up, for example for Passover, he would let them in, and then refuse to let them out – thus putting ever more strain on food and water supplies.)

Anyway, the Temple was destroyed.

Now Biblical scholars know that Mark's gospel was probably written around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. Whether just before or just after is a matter for conjecture. But in any event these words of Jesus can refer to no other subject than the firing of the Temple. This Temple was a hugely magnificent and significant place.

It was all begun in 19 BC. The Temple itself was finished in about two years, though work continued on the immense complex for another 80. (It covered an area five football pitches long.)

It was built by King Herod the Great, and known by his many victims as a murdering thug. But in spite of all, Herod truly was a great builder, and the Temple in Jerusalem was thought by many to be the most beautiful building in the world.

The exterior was covered in white marble and gold. One can only imagine the reaction of pilgrims upon first seeing it, especially if they arrived in the morning with the early light striking the front facade. This shining structure would have seemed a fitting place indeed for God's presence on earth.

But one day as Jesus and his followers were leaving the temple compound, one of the disciples marvelled at the magnificence of the Second Temple.

*"What massive stones! What fantastically huge buildings!"* the disciple exclaims.

Jesus' answer is tantamount to blasphemy. His words strike at the heart of Jewish national identity and the religion of his ancestors. This was the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -- the centre of everything Jewish. And this Jesus of Nazareth has the audacity to say:

---

<sup>1</sup> Josephus: The Wars of the Jews Book 6:9,3

*'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'*

But we need to understand too that many Jews had mixed reactions to the Temple.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, it held prominent psychological space as the centre of their religion and their national life. On the other hand, it was rife with corruption and collaboration with Rome. At least some of Jesus' massive support among the common people can be attributed to his confrontational stance toward the Temple. (When he is teaching in the Temple, working over the scribes and Temple bureaucrats, Mark says--12:37--that "the large crowd was listening to him with delight.")

Nevertheless there was profound reverence for the place – and it was seen ultimately as the presence of God in the midst of the Holy City.

So when Jesus speaks those devastating words we can measure the stunned reaction of the disciples by the suggestion in the gospel that they did not say anything until they had left the temple area in Jerusalem, gone down into the Kidron valley to the east and sat on the Mt. of Olives, where the eastern side of Jerusalem and the temple complex could be seen.

Words like Jesus spoke have usually been profoundly unwelcome. Throughout history, the kings and princes of Europe had traditionally viewed with extreme disfavour the idea of a judgment at the end of this age and a Millennium to follow. Just imagine why, for example, King Henry VIII was very angry when he heard that his subjects were reading smuggled copies of William Tyndale's New Testament. Upon hearing that they were discussing the judgment at the end of the age, he flew into a rage. Archbishop Wolsey was summoned and questioned about this matter. A series of events then led to Tyndale being hunted down, captured, condemned, and burned at the stake.

So when Peter, James, John and Andrew come to Jesus privately to ask what this is all about they are treading in areas that always were dangerous, and continued that way through the ages. This fragment from Mark's gospel is "apocalyptic" writing.

The word Ἀποκάλυψις means "lifting of the veil" and it is a term applied to the disclosure to certain privileged persons of something hidden from the majority of humankind. The Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation are the biggest examples in Scripture. But right through the history of the church, apocalyptic movements have risen and fallen. It was perverse apocalyptic thinking, for example, that used to take followers up to the top of the Old Man of Coniston to wait for the end of the world, or which much more tragically led to the formation of such sects as were involved in the Jonestown mass suicide, or the massacre at Waco, Texas.

Apocalyptic thinking can be dangerous in the wrong minds. Apocalyptic is literature for tough times. It flourished in the period from 300 BC to 100 AD – very bad years for the Jews. And sometimes it flourishes today.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com>

The first-called disciples--Peter, James, John, and Andrew--then ask an interesting question: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be brought to completion?"

But Jesus began to say to them, *"See that no one may lead you astray. Many will come in my name saying that 'I am', and they will lead many astray. But when you hear of wars and reports of wars, do not be alarmed. It is necessary to be, but not yet the completion. For nation will be raised upon nation, and kingdom upon kingdom. There will be earthquakes in places. There will be famines. These things are the beginning of birth pangs."*

Place Jesus' statement in the context of the final days of the Roman-Jewish War. In AD 69, the atmosphere of Jerusalem was thick with religious ardour. Many were proclaiming the Messiah was near. They may even have proclaimed themselves the Messiah. See also a similar warning in 13:21-22: "And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect." Messianic fervours was in the air--indeed, it was suffocating.

"Wars and reports of wars" is a condition that is true at virtually any point in history, including our own. Probably the greatest issue in anyone's mind right now – still in the shadow of Remembrance, still in the regular shadow of the coffins of young soldiers coming to RAF Lyneham! In Iraq and in Afghanistan our ethical, moral, historical, military, economic, political insecurities have all come together. We as much as those disciples may want to hear from Jesus' lips some understanding of where on earth and why we are all going?

The first century was not so different. The insecurities were massive. Wars, famines and earthquakes – the most fertile breeding ground for apocalyptic – were everywhere. Wars, famines and earthquakes! They are symbols of, in Paul Tillich's phrase, "the shaking of the foundations". All that we depend on can disappear. Against these uncertainties and anxieties, Jesus tells his followers not to be "alarmed". These are all "necessary but they are not yet the grand and glorious consummation. They are the "birth pangs" which precede the emergence of something entirely new. And Paul will use the same image when he talks of the "whole creation...groaning in labour pains until now"<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt about it – apocalyptic writing like this in Mark is foreign to our everyday thinking. It is rooted in all the things that frighten us, and we would rather not face up to. But they do speak an important word to us. Things may be, indeed are, terrible. And yet God will make things right. That is the message of apocalyptic.

For Mark, does indeed intervene, but not in the form of fanatical and violent resistance of the Zealots to Rome. Not in the figure of a Messiah who will be a great war leader in that very context. God has come as a baby born into weakness and poverty, one who suffers, one who at the end reigns from a cross, which great act draws all things together into newness – a new world of God, an *ἔσχατον*, a promise which will be fulfilled.

Apocalyptic is for tough times. But then so is our God.

---

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:22