

Sunday 29th November 2020

Mark 13:24-37 (No one knows when)

Talk by Andrew Griffiths, Prayers by Betty Friend

Hi, my name is Andrew and thanks for downloading the talk for St John's church for Sunday 29th November. I will be reading from Mark 13:24-37, giving a short talk and then we will hear Betty's prayers, before we end.

This is the first Sunday of Advent – the countdown to Christmas begins. This is a time of waiting and hoping, and it reminds us of the hope we have for Jesus' return and eternal life. Our passage this morning helps us to think about what we are waiting and hoping for – and how our hope is certain, because we can be sure of the love that God has for us.

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ 'But in those days, following that distress,

“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;

²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

²⁶ 'At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸ 'Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³² 'But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It's like a man going away: he leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ 'Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: “Watch!””

This morning's passage is quite dramatic, isn't it? Jesus is recorded in Mark's Gospel in full apocalyptic mode. It can, at points, feel like it chimes pretty well with the dramatic times we live in. The Oxford English Dictionary have recognised this 'unprecedented' year by picking several 'words of the year', rather than their normal one. In fact, unprecedented is one of the words they have chosen. Others include bushfires, Covid-19, WFH, lockdown, circuit-breaker, support bubbles, keyworkers, furlough, Black Lives Matter and moonshot.

Of course, many people are simply suggesting that 2020 itself becomes a term of disgust. For many, this has been an extremely sad year – missed milestones, uncertainty, lost jobs, and sickness and death in the family. As we enter the strangest Advent season that probably any of us can remember, this passage from Mark is, in fact, very appropriate for us.

Advent means 'coming', it is about the certainty of a future event – it is not yet fully here, but we know it will come. It is, in essence, the season both of waiting and of hope. Though our passage may seem difficult and full of violent imagery, it is also about waiting and hope – it is about Jesus's glory. It falls within a tradition – called apocalyptic writing – from which we get our word of apocalypse.

I'd like to quickly pause and look at this word, because for us it has become to mean 'the end of the world' or the 'destruction of the world', but the Greek means to 'uncover' or 'disclose' – it is to reveal what is hidden, as in the book of revelation. Apocalypses in the Bible – for there are several – mean the moment when what is really happening, when the truth of the situation in the world, is made apparent. Inequality, abuse of power, subjugation of God's people – these are all uncovered. But more than this – apocalypses are about the revelation of God's power over events.

Jesus' return will be the ultimate apocalypse – not in that it will bring about the destruction of the world, far from it; Jesus' coming will reveal, uncover and disclose the true power of God to remake the world. It will also reveal the Kingdom of God, whose seeds have been growing for over 2,000 years.

Apocalyptic writing is about God's control – it presents the world as chaotic, but God breaks through the chaos to bring order. And in our passage, Jesus used this tradition and put himself at the centre of it – He will be the one who breaks through the chaos to bring order. This is a picture of Jesus' glory – we are told that it will not be ambiguous, it will be clear. No one will say – oh, was that Jesus returning, I think I missed it.

I quickly want to deal with a confusing part of the passage: verse 30, where Jesus said that 'this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened'. Now, we know that the first Christians are long-since dead. Even those who died after a long and fulfilling life, in the comfort of their homes, with their families and from natural causes, died nearly 2000 years ago. So what did Jesus mean?

Apparently, CS Lewis described this as the 'most embarrassing verse in the Bible', but it depends on how we view the coming of Christ into glory. It depends on whether we see the return of Jesus as a single event, or the culmination of His ministry – do we see one event happening at the cross, then a pause of at least 2000 years (who knows how many) and then another event?

It's tempting to see it like that – but Jesus clearly didn't. He used imagery of what would happen when he died – the sky became dark, the temple curtain split in two. These happened. Then Jesus rose again in glory, ascended to heaven and will return.

Since Jesus' resurrection, to this point, the Kingdom of God is growing on earth – it is both happening now and not yet. If we understand the coming of God's kingdom to have started with Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and to continue through all generations and through us, rather than as some rapture event, this strange verse begins to make some sense.

But there is a lot more to unpack in this passage. To really understand the passage, we have to know the language it uses; we have to unpick the meaning using our knowledge of the tradition of apocalyptic writing that Jesus is using. These images are not to be taken literally – they are a symbolic representation of truth, heavily steeped in Old Testament tradition and poetry. We are not supposed to sit and stare at the night sky in the hope of seeing Jesus surfing a cloud – it is a representation of heaven coming to earth, of the rule of God descending to us through Jesus. As we've already seen, this is a process, which is already happening.

So, there are a few key pieces of the apocalyptic language that I'd like to translate:

Jesus – referring to himself as the Son of Man, a tradition that came from the apocalyptic writing of Daniel – will come from the clouds in ‘great power and glory’ – verse 26.

By using the term, Son of Man, Jesus has immediately put himself into the apocalyptic tradition of Daniel – Son of Man was the term used by Daniel to describe the coming of the Messiah in Daniel 7:13-14:

‘In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.’

You can see why Jesus used the term Son of Man here, can’t you? The imagery that he employs comes straight from Daniel. Jesus is saying to his followers, ‘I am the Messiah’. He is saying that God’s Kingdom is coming through him. And it comes with great power and with the certainty of eternity.

Then in verse 27, Jesus says he will gather the four winds – this is a poetic way of describing the universality of God’s people – from the four corners of the world. This is similar to Daniel 7:14 – God’s Kingdom is for all people, not just those from a few countries. It is not specifically for Israel. It is about the universality of God’s people – that our distinctions of nationality, race, gender, and all the other labels, are meaningless for God’s kingdom. Jesus is gathering all his people into one kingdom, under himself. From Afghan to Zimbabwean, from American to Congolese, British to French – it makes no difference – Jesus gathers us all to himself.

In verse 28, Jesus then talked about the fig tree – when the twigs become tender and buds appear, we know that winter is over, and summer is near. This is a positive thing – Jesus intentionally chose a positive image of the beginning of the Kingdom of God. But the key thing here is that the imagery of a fig tree was not chosen for a random purpose. Jesus chose it because it was a direct opposite of an Old Testament image, the image of despair.

Bear with me here:

At the beginning of the passage, Jesus quoted Isaiah, from two places – Isaiah 10 and 34. And if we look at the passage Jesus quoted from Isaiah 34:4, we can see why the words Jesus chose to describe the signs of his glory were so meaningful:

‘All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shrivelled figs from the fig-tree.’

Now, our translations are slightly different, but we can see that Jesus started using the prophesy of Isaiah but twisted the ending. Instead of the fig tree shrivelling, it is instead about to burst forth with new life. We’ve got a fig tree in our garden, and against all my expectations it is prolific in its fruit. And they are glorious – sweet, honey-smooth and tasty. As God’s Kingdom becomes a reality, there will be no shrivelled fruit, but the beauty of fresh, tender figs. As Jesus said, that first generation of Christians saw the twigs become tender and the leaves come out, as the great harvest of God’s Kingdom started. Jesus’ time of glory is not a time of despair, it is a time of hope – the coming, the advent, of God’s Kingdom is the coming of new life, peace, joy, and truth.

This is the thing with advent – it is about the celebration of hope, of the coming of the kingdom that will have no end. But hope is here already, God’s Kingdom is breaking in – this is the kingdom with no end, but also that has already begun. So whilst we look for the time to come when Jesus’ power is made completely apparent in the world, we know that the Kingdom of God is already at work in our

lives and countless other. God's Kingdom has been revealed in the person of Christ Jesus – that apocalypse has happened. God's power to save and redeem has already been uncovered and made apparent – and we are called to live our lives in the hope of eternity.

We do look for a new apocalypse – the full revealing and uncovering of God's Kingdom, when Jesus returns, but the verses 32-37 of our passage are clear that we are not to wait around, sitting on our hands, until that time. Jesus calls us to guard against complacency, to act as though the culmination of God's Kingdom, through the return of Christ, were to happen today. Not just because it might – we do not know when that time will come', verse 33. But because we have been given a task – verse 34 – and that task is to spread the good news, the gospel, of Christ's coming.

We are told not to be complacent in this time of advent – in this time of waiting, hope and realisation. So let's not be complacent. Let's stand up to injustice – be that through the injustice of debt, fought through our wonderful CAP centre. Or the injustice of hunger, fought through our foodbank. Let's tell people the good news of Christ – there is an Alpha course coming up, could you help, could you invite someone to join? We have Christmas celebrations coming up – they may not be like last year, but thanks to Team Miller, we will have some really exciting Christmas zoom services to be involved in.

There are a lot of things for us to do – to live in the advent of God's Kingdom – but the most important thing for us, as Jesus said, is to always live with a sense of the anticipation of Christ's coming – both His coming meaningfully into the lives of His people now, and His final return. As this strange 2020 advent progresses, let's keep this as our focus – let us live with hope and anticipation.

Let's pray

God of majesty and power
Who spoke and this world was
Who breathed and this world lived
Who counts the hairs upon our head
Who sees our thoughts and reads our hearts
Who loves us more than we deserve
How can we not bring today
Our sacrifice of praise?
For in the child at Bethlehem
Lies the promise of intimacy
With a Saviour who would die even for me
And the promise of an eternity
In which to praise you more each day
God of promise we praise your name, Amen

Let us continue in our prayer.

Prayers

Almighty Father, as we look forward to the season of Advent, we thank and praise you for the greatest gift this world has ever received, Your Son, Jesus. We pray for those who are working to spread the knowledge and love of Jesus around the world, thinking especially of the Day family working in Thailand. We live in a time where many are suffering as a result of the corona virus, but this has come at a time when so many people in the world are suffering as a result of conflict, terrorist attacks, flood, famine, bad government and natural disasters, thinking particularly of Nigeria, Ukraine, Mali, Pakistan, The Philippines and North Korea. We pray that you will surround

them with your love, strength and comfort and practical support from aid agencies. We pray that talks between the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Israel will ease the tensions in the Middle East. We also pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

We are sorry that we have not lived up to your standards, when we have said or done things which are wrong, and not said or done the things which we ought. Lord, forgive us and help us to do better.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

We pray for our government at this time of economic pressure. Give them wisdom and compassion as they seek to resolve the problems. We pray for those struggling financially and emotionally and pray that jobs will be created for those who have been made redundant or who are not receiving support. While restrictions make life uncomfortable, help people to see that they need to obey instructions to keep themselves and others safe. Bless our key workers and keep them safe. We pray too for those grieving for loved ones.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

We pray for our community, and thank you for Rachel, Lin and Gareth who continue to support our CAP clients, and we thank you that provision of food is continuing through our food bank. Many are struggling financially, emotionally, spiritually, physically and through loneliness. Thank you for those who are keeping in touch with those who cannot connect with social media. Surround them with your love and comfort. We thank you for our key workers, the medical staff, those involved in keeping food supplies available, our bin men, and many others that we do not always think about. Bless them and keep them safe.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

We pray for our community here at St. John's. We ask that the merger with Holy Trinity will go smoothly, and that you are preparing the person who will become our new vicar. We thank you for the work of Ian and Steve, our church wardens, for Sue who keeps us up to date, for Andrew managing the finances and for the P.C.C. We thank you for home group leaders who are carrying on bringing bible study and support.

We pray for those who are unwell, asking your blessing and healing on Audrey, Julia and Alison, Zak, Lorraine and thank you that Andy is out of hospital and feeling better. Let us take a moment to remember those known to us who need you at this time. Keep us all strong in faith and love at this time.

Father accept these prayers for the sake of Your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen

Thank you again for downloading this morning's talk and prayers.

God bless