

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

Advent Sunday December 2, 2007

Routine History

8:30 am, Holy Communion

10:30 am Holy Communion

The Text

Matthew 24:1-14

Jesus Foretells Destruction of the Temple

1 Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. **2** But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

Signs of the Close of the Age

3 As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" **4** And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. **5** For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. **6** And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. **7** For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. **8** All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

9"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. **10** And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. **11**

And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. **12** And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. **13** But the one who endures to the end will be saved. **14** And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

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This morning we are starting a series of three sermons on Matthew 24 that will look at this chapter in its entirety. Matthew, as a Gospel writer shows us Jesus as the New Law Giver, the Second Moses. In this Gospel we are shown that the Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law. As Moses gave five books of the Law,¹ Jesus gives five major discourses in this Gospel.² That discourse found here in chapters 24 and 25 is the fifth of these. Just as Moses was responsible for the first five books of the Old Testament so Matthew has Jesus address the people with five extended sermons in which he talks about the Kingdom of God.

This fifth discourse is set during the Tuesday of Holy Week. Earlier that day Jesus had addressed the religious establishment with a burning sermon and the day before he had overturned the table of the money changers. In these actions Jesus had judged the Temple authorities for turning God's House of Prayer onto a place where money was made to shore up the institution.

As we look at this text we learn three things:

1. This passage and the chapter as a whole needs to be understood as a prophetic text that foretells the future.
2. In this passage Jesus shows us what the world will be like in between his resurrection and ascension up until the Great Tribulation.
3. In this passage we are told that perseverance and courage are needed in order to remain faithful.

1. This passage and the chapter as a whole needs to be understood as a prophetic text that foretells the future.

As Jesus and the Disciples leave the temple area they looked back at these remarkable buildings, considered to be one of the wonders of the ancient world. They had been more than sixty years in the making and now, by the time of Jesus, they had reached their completion. As

¹ Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy

² Sermon on the Mount 5-7; Commissioning of the Disciples 10; Parables of the Kingdom 13; The Call to forgiveness 18; Discourse and Parables on history and the Second Coming 24-25.

they walk down the Kidron Valley and then up the other side into the Mount of Olives, the disciples were I think perplexed. As Jesus left the Temple he had said these words, recorded right at the end of chapter 23:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house [the Temple] is forsaken and desolate."³

The disciples were wondering what does he mean when he says that the Temple is forsaken and desolate? After all, look at these wonderful buildings. Jesus however is not impressed. Instead of celebrating their majesty he prophesies their destruction. This is a prophecy which would be fulfilled in 70 AD.

In Luke 21:20, we have other details of this predicted overthrow of the city and the Temple. There Jesus adds, "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near." Forty years later, the Roman armies under Titus came in and fulfilled the prediction to the very letter. Titus was the son of the Emperor Vespasian. Titus himself became Emperor in 79 AD and reigned until 81 AD, when he died suddenly at the age of 41.⁴ With Titus was a Jewish historian named Josephus who recorded the terrible story of the siege of Jerusalem in minute detail. It was one of the most ghastly sieges in all history. When the Romans came the city was divided among three warring factions of Jews, who were so at each others' throats that they paid no heed to the approach of the Romans. Thus, Titus came up and surrounded the city while it was distracted by its own internal warfare. The Romans assaulted the walls again and again, and gave every opportunity to the Jews to surrender and save their capital destruction.

During the long siege a terrible famine raged in the city and the bodies of the inhabitants of the city were literally stacked like cordwood in the streets. The toll of Jewish suffering was horrible but they would not surrender the city. Josephus writes:

All the prisoners taken from the beginning to the end of the war totaled 97,000, those who perished in the long siege 1,100,000. Of these the majority were Jews by race but not Jerusalem citizens; they

³ Matthew 23:37ff

⁴ Titus." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2007. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 2 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9072659>>.

*had come together from the whole country for the Feast of Unleavened Bread and had suddenly been caught up in the war.*⁵

When at last the walls were breached Titus tried to preserve the Temple by giving orders to his soldiers not to destroy or burn it. But the anger of the soldiers against the Jews was so intense that, maddened by the resistance they encountered, they disobeyed the order of their general and set fire to the temple on August 10 70 AD.⁶ There were great quantities of gold and silver which had been placed in the Temple for safekeeping. This melted and ran down between the rocks and into the cracks of the stones that formed the Temple and the wall around it. When the Roman soldiers finally took the city, in their greed to obtain this gold and silver they took long bars and pried apart these massive stones. Thus, quite literally, not one stone was left standing upon another. The Temple itself was totally destroyed though the wall supporting the area upon which the Temple was built was left partially intact and a portion of it remains to this day, called the Western Wall.

Jesus had predicted the destruction of the Temple in AD 33. At the time of his prediction it would have seemed unimaginable to the disciples that such an event could happen. But 37 years later what Jesus had said on the Tuesday of Holy Week while sitting with his disciples in the Mount of Olives was fulfilled. In Josephus we have the record of one who was not sympathetic to the Christian movement record its fulfillment.

2. In this passage Jesus shows us what the world will be like in between his resurrection and ascension up until the Great Tribulation

This is important for us to understand if we are to interpret aright the rest of this chapter. If the event recorded at the beginning of the chapter had a historical fulfillment, so too will the rest of the chapter. The events recorded in 24:15⁷ to the end of the chapter still await fulfillment. However the things Jesus says in our text for today from verse 4 – 14 are what I have termed routine history. In this passage Jesus shows us what the world will be like in between his resurrection and ascension up until the Great Tribulation.

I would like to read the passage for you in the Message paraphrase:

⁵ Josephus; *The Jewish War* (A New Translation by G.A. Williamson. Penguin Classics 1959), page 337

⁶ Ibid , page 323

⁷ Verse 3 of our current passage pertains more to verses 15ff. I will discuss it in relation to next week's sermon.

Jesus said, "Watch out for doomsday deceivers. Many leaders are going to show up with forged identities, claiming, 'I am Christ, the Messiah.' They will deceive a lot of people. When reports come in of wars and rumored wars, keep your head and don't panic. This is routine history; this is no sign of the end. Nation will fight nation and ruler fight ruler, over and over. Famines and earthquakes will occur in various places. This is nothing compared to what is coming.

They are going to throw you to the wolves and kill you, everyone hating you because you carry my name. And then, going from bad to worse, it will be dog-eat-dog, everyone at each other's throat, everyone hating each other.

In the confusion, lying preachers will come forward and deceive a lot of people. For many others, the overwhelming spread of evil will do them in—nothing left of their love but a mound of ashes.

Here the disciples and us are warned of danger ahead. These verses provide a dose of realism that needs to be heeded. It seems no matter how hard we try to rid the world of war, hatred and conflicts of all kinds, we cannot do it. Here Jesus tells us that these struggles are woven into the very fabric of the world. As these types of events occur we need to keep our heads about us. These things are not signs of the end, but rather routine history.

- i) **Here Jesus describes for us those who will come in his name but are in fact anti-Christ.** The term, "antichrist", does not indicate someone who is openly against Christ, like an atheist or a pagan. Rather it is one who appears instead of Christ, and in this sense opposes true Christianity. It is a counterfeit Christ.
- ii) **He also anticipates the conflicts that will plague the world.** Clearly he is not predicting any one specific war, or revolution. He is characterizing the general course of the age. It will be marked by continual turmoil among nations, and the fears, the alarms, the degradation, the horror, the misery, of war. His words telescope together all the effect that wars produce on the human heart.
- iii) **Thirdly he anticipates natural calamity.** For almost two thousand years these natural calamities have been occurring. They are not, therefore, "signs of the times, that the end is near. Jesus simply states that during the intervening age there will be famines, pestilences, earthquakes, and other natural disasters.

- iv) **Fourthly Jesus anticipates persecution:** Here the peril is a religious persecution. This began shortly after the day of Pentecost when Stephen and James were slain and disciples were scattered. Who is not familiar with the terrible stories of Christians who were thrown to lions, burned as human torches, mangled by wild beasts, killed by gladiators, tortured, torn apart by wild horses, or martyred in other dreadful ways? Another great period of martyrdom broke out at the time of the Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries. We can read the accounts in all their gruesome details in *Fox's Book of Martyrs*. But do you know what is the most tortuous century of all? The century in which more Christians have died for their faith than in any other was the 20th century! It is believed that in that one century more Christians have died for their faith than in the preceding nineteen centuries combined.
- v) **Fifthly Jesus anticipates apostasy:** And many will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another." This is the terrible pressure of apostasy. When combined with persecution it represents a powerful double attack upon a quiet trust in Christ. It is highly disturbing to be left standing alone; to see, one by one, those who previously were on your side, depart, give in, succumb to the pressure and leave you unsupported and alone. If they also betray you in the process, it is almost unbearable. "Demas...has [forsaken] me, [having loved] this present world," writes the apostle Paul from his cold prison in Rome. Even to such a strong spirit as his, that must have been a severe blow.

3. In this passage we are told that perseverance and courage are needed in order to remain faithful.

Jesus in categorizing these five horrors does so to show us how history will unfold. It is his intention I think to do this so that we will recognize how pervasive evil will be in the world even after the victory of the Cross and Resurrection. To be Christians in a world such as this will not be easy and so perseverance and courage are needed to remain faithful. This is my third point.

Fortunately for us, Jesus does not stop with this black picture. He goes on to a further unveiling. It is of enormous importance, for it contains the secret power—the power to stand against deceit and delusion and to avoid the fate of being "led astray." It is introduced by that little word "but."

"13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

Despite the pressures, despite the impossibility of the natural mind's remaining undecieved, despite the subtle siren voices that sound-nevertheless, some will see through the distortions, the perversions of truth, the silken deceptions, and will stand true. Some will endure to the end. These will not and cannot be overthrown. They will be saved. The end referred to here is not the end of the age, for obviously, no one could live through the entire twenty centuries of this intervening age. What Jesus means here is the end of life.

These words of Jesus are often distorted to mean that if someone does his best to hang on and live a good clean life, then, if he endures to the end he will be saved. But it is quite the other way around. If he or she is truly saved, then they will endure to the end and the fact that they endure makes obvious to all that they are saved.

No doubt it is true that there is no use having a good beginning if there is not a strong finish; but it is equally true that there is no possibility of a strong finish unless there has been a good beginning. Only those who have genuinely found Christ will endure to the end. What our Lord is bringing out here is that the strength of character which permits them to stand fast demands an unceasing flow of power, for they are exposed to an unceasing flow of pressure. They can stand only if there is power available that can keep them every single moment of the way. That power is revealed in what these people say. They will not stand, but they will speak as well.

"And this gospel of the kingdom" Jesus said, "will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

The good news they preach reveals the secret of their ability to stand. They tell everywhere the story of One who "has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). Amid the pressures of the age they reveal that they have heard and obeyed the good news, and there stands with them One whose very life is imparted to them and who can keep them against all the deceit of the world in which they live.

It was the Lord himself who said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." No matter how the wolves howl, fangs drip, and opposition mounts on every side, still they will follow him. Why? Because, as he goes on to say, "I give them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and

no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."⁸ This is what keeps them and makes them able to stand in the midst of a flood of deceit. They will move against the stream, sometimes in blood and tears and terrible loneliness, but they will not succumb.

The Hour No One Knows

When this good news of "the kingdom of his beloved Son" has been preached as a testimony to all nations, then shall the end of the age begin, said Jesus. That is one unmistakable mark of the approaching end. It is supremely significant that this present epoch is the first epoch in twenty long centuries of which it may be unreservedly said that the gospel is being preached throughout the whole world to all nations. This is properly a "sign of the times" which marks the near approach of the end. When the sirens of the Last Day begin to moan, and the panicky, jostling crowd tries to get in the door at the last moment, then will be unveiled the deceitfulness of the age. But only those who have learned to walk day by day will be able to endure to the end.

In the light of this clear revelation of the character of the age, the exhortation of Jesus takes on new impact. "Watch," he said, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." The question he leaves with us is: What is there in your life that is different than another's? Do not prate about outward religious differences. They do not count. They can all too easily be a part of the "broad way that leads to destruction." Have you stood at the narrow way and done business with the One who says truly, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Is his life in you? Has he come to indwell you, to strengthen and keep you every day by a continual impartation of his life through you, in terms of your personality? This alone will make the difference. The test of reality is endurance, and only those who thus stand have every really known him.

Prayer

Father, how confusing are the voices we hear, how accurate is our Lord's prediction that these voices will be sounding out in ever increasing clamor to deceive us, mislead us, pervert, and destroy us. How thankful we are for that other voice, the clear voice of the Holy Spirit who interprets to us the truth of Scripture. Help us to ask him to begin his wonderful work of sustaining and keeping, empowering and strengthening, till we can stand in the midst of the flood of deceit around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

⁸ John 10:14ff

