

## 12 Judgement Day

In Jerusalem Jesus went regularly to the temple to speak and to teach. You didn't have to be a priest, or ordained, to do that, tho no doubt the priests and the temple guard kept a close ear on what was said and they had the power to arrest trouble-makers. The Temple was in some ways more liberal, open and democratic than most Christian churches today. (It was a bit like St Paul's Cathedral and Hyde Park Speakers' Corner rolled into one.) Tho the law and the required performance of ritual kept much of the temple's life titely under the control of the priesthood, speech was relatively free. An unqualified layman, even one under suspicion and in conflict with the authorities, could speak and teach in the temple courts, and if the people approved, the authorities' power to react was limited. As in the whole of Jewish and Israelite society, there was a helthy balance of powers, in which the wishes of the people - at least such of them as were gathered in the cities - normally had to be respected.

Even when Jesus disrupted temple business and cleared out the court, they were forced to acknowledge that there was right on his side. There was nothing in what he had done to support a charge of rioting, and certainly not of blasphemy. He had shown more zeal for the temple than the temple guardians themselves. So, at least while the people supported him, they could only challenge him on his authority to act. Which they did; but Jesus bounced the challenge right back on them.

A delegation of high-ranking priests and elders approached him and asked him to state his authority for acting so boldly. A very constructive and fruitful line of questioning, if the enquirers have an open mind and are really concerned to examine your authority. But this was only a ploy, designed to get him making claims that could be represented as overbearing or even blasphemous. So he asked them what they thought of John the Baptiser's authority: Was that a God-given authority? If they were seriously concerned with examining and recognising authority they would have a view on John's, for the people believed he was a prophet, and he had been executed for speaking out against the king. But they were only interested in safely getting advantage of him, and it was not to their advantage to say now what they thought about John. As the temple had never accepted John's authority, they could not now say he came from God. People's memories were not that short. But neither could they deny that he had spoken for God: for this was a public place, and John, as a martyr, was popular with the people gathered around. The delegation backed out, lamely claiming that they didn't know. And Jesus, having got no answer, declined to answer them for his authority.

He carried on teaching in the temple, and tho the leaders did not like what they heard, they could not simply have him ejected as unauthorised, like a modern bishop or dean could do. They had to trap him into saying something demonstrably blasphemous or seditious, so there would be an excuse to arrest him or something to discredit him in the eyes of the people.

Their next approach was to push on the boundaries of sedition. As a respected teacher, one with a knowledge of the laws of God, did he think it was lawful or not to pay taxes to the Roman emperor? That question would land him in trouble either way. Before this, he had put them on the spot, and now they had him on the spot. This was confrontational politics at its best - but there was deadly intent lurking within it. If he answered yes, that it was right to pay Caesar's taxes, that would puncture his popularity. The man the crowd had welcomed as the Saviour, bringer of the restored kingdom of David, now meekly telling them to pay their taxes to the Romans! But if he said no, if he spoke out against the taxes, he would be in even deeper trouble. The Governor's soldiers would soon be dealing with him.

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Jesus did not try to reason his way thru an answer, but exposed the question itself as a sham. “Show me the coin you pay with.” And when they passed him a denarius, he asked: “Whose image is this on the coin?” Of course, it was Caesar’s. By the very fact that they accepted and used Roman coins, they were showing that, whether they liked it or not, whether it was fair or not, they all accepted that the Romans were in charge. They were not seriously enquiring whether they should stop paying taxes. He dismissed the question: “Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and give to God what belongs to God.”

Jesus’ answer has often been quoted as if it endorsed a separation between religion and politics, church and state, the things of God and the things of this world. Of course, it means no such thing. Jesus gave that answer from the midst of a struggle for the heart of Israel that was at once religious, political, social and personal. There is no way that Jesus would recognise separate spheres of interest for Caesar and for God, as if they divided the world between them. So if the coin was Caesar’s, it would be good and godly to give it to Caesar; and in everything they did, whether it was paying taxes or worshipping in the temple, they should, as God’s good servants, give glory to him.

In his disputations with the leadership, Jesus eluded the traps some people set for him, but he did not have to avoid all their questions. Sometimes he came down very clearly on one side.

An issue that split the ruling classes right down the middle was that of the resurrection of the dead. The priestly and aristocratic classes, the Sadducees, held strictly to the books of the Law of Moses, which spoke only of the future of the nation and not of a resurrection for those who had died. (Perhaps, as the aristocratic ruling class, they were not keen on a belief which might inspire ordinary people to give even their lives for their future hopes. A ruling class needs death to be the final sanction.) Others, particularly the Pharisees, held the writings of the prophets to be sacred scripture and drew heavily on the traditions reflected in the Books of Macchabees: the virtuous dead would rise again, restored to life by God and rewarded with glory. When the question was put to Jesus he proclaimed the same belief as the Pharisees: the dead would rise and live a new life with God. He even claimed that this could be seen from the books of the Law itself, where God declared “I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob.”

God is God of the living, not of the dead.

(Mark 12:27)

Nor was it all confrontation and argument. One of the scribes who was genuinely interested in the discussions asked him which he considered the most important commandment, and Jesus told him: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One God. You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul, with all your strength and with all your mind.” The commandment that overarches all others is this commandment of total dedication to God as the true and greatest good in all our lives. And the second greatest commandment is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” The scribe was in total agreement, and Jesus said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of heaven.”

There were, then, some successes. But as long as Jesus stayed in Jerusalem he was in danger. The little spats were more than academic arguments between rivals for attention and prestige. Nor were they just theology; or perhaps we should say they were theology, theology for real: arguments about the most fundamental values and realities on which all other positions would have to be based. Jerusalem was dangerous because Jerusalem stood for a whole way of running society and a whole hierarchy of powers to enjoy status within it, that depended on a particular understanding of God and of God’s ultimate values. Because Jesus’ teaching and his actions challenged that understanding, they threatened Jerusalem.

I do not want to give the impression that ultimately Jesus was a political activist and that we have to re-evaluate him in this light. The political Jesus is not an alternative to the warm, personal, compassionate Jesus we are more used to thinking of. He is that personal Jesus, taking our own personal reality seriously and compassionately in all its reality, which includes the social and political, in which we inseparably exist, without which we would be no more than foraging animals. It includes the social and the political because this is where all people, whether they know it or not, become people together, where values are hammered out and shared, where for our own sanity and survival, we cling to one another and pressure one another to live according to whatever rules we think will save us from chaos. Jesus' mission includes the social and the political because unless you change people as a community you do not change people.

Because he loved, and because that love was for his people, for his own who belonged to him and to whom he was giving himself, Jesus was in Jerusalem doing battle to the death with the authorities and the social structures of his people. Because they were as their society shaped them, and because their society took its shape from their needs and fears and aspirations, he did not expect to engage with them, his people, unless he engaged with the whole personal, relational, civil and political reality that they were. Because he loved, because his commitment, his love and his compassion knew no limits, he would engage them in everything, personal, political or social, that belonged to their whole reality.

When Jesus spoke of the greatest commandment and commended the scribe who understood this teaching about love of God and love of neighbor, he was not talking about some private feelings of piety and good-will. He was talking about the very bonds of social existence, our existence as God's people and our shared existence for one another. Love is about being with and being together – as are politics, economics and law. Even as he spelt out the commandment of love, Jesus' ministry was approaching its climax where he would engage the whole "togetherness" of his people, fulfilling everything that the law of God intended for them. The first of all commandments and the one that is like it, are the expression of ultimate value, calling for commitment to God and to one another as our ultimate value, effective in all our decisions, and governing the whole of our society.

Jesus had nearly finished his teaching, and he had at last an announcement to make. It was the nearest he would come to a public claim that he was the Messiah. But it was still a question. Jesus would not claim a title that people could too easily misunderstand to their own destruction. He knew what the Roman garrison would do to a crowd that came out proclaiming a new Jewish king. But neither would he renounce that title, or dismiss it as he had dismissed the irrelevant issues raised to trap him. Rather, he invited the people to think again about it. He took up the Messianic title, the one that was firmly grounded in scripture, "Son of David", and asked his listeners:

How can the teachers maintain that the Messiah is the Son of David? For David himself, inspired by God's Spirit, calls him 'Lord'. And Jesus quoted the psalm:

The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand.  
I will put your enemies under your feet.

(Ps 110:1)

If they wanted to recognise the Messiah, they would have to look, not for a copy of David, but for one who was altogether greater than David. If the Messiah was to be the Son of David as everyone called him, he would have to be a new kind of son and heir, one who would be, not a ruler like David, but David's own ruler.

Jesus was declaring himself at last. Until he had shown in his own body what the Messiah would be, this would stand as his final answer, this question. And Mark tells us that the majority of the

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people were delighted. They understood his claim, if not its implications. But apparently they understood enough not to run riot with their idea of a new king. There was no disturbance in Jerusalem.

Having declared himself, Jesus proceeded to the expected task of every ruler: to pass judgement on society, distinguishing good and evil with final authority. He had only two pronouncements to make:

on the one hand his judgement of society's leaders, the men of status, influence and wealth. They love to be dressed impressively and addressed by title, due deference shown in the most public places. They like the seats of honour in church and at civic receptions. And they grow wealthy by exploiting the weak. But they have no honor from the Messiah.

on the other hand, he commended a poor widow. He had been watching the parade at the temple treasury, where the high and the low came to make their donations – presumably this was over and above the temple tax. He dismissed the show of the well-off who from their surpluses cascaded coins into the chest. A penny, dropped in by a poor woman who had nothing else to live on, was of more value than all their donations.

So much from the man who was held to be the Messiah. Judgement had been given, and if the people heard him as Messiah, they would learn not to be taken in by appearances, especially those appearances staged by wealth and status. A crisis was coming. Jesus had openly condemned the ruling classes, the very ones who had respect, influence and power on their side. Anyone who listened to him would now have to decide where they stood.

The prophet Isaiah<sup>1</sup> had once spoken of Israel as a vineyard planted in fertile and well-cleared soil, carefully tended by its owner – a vineyard, however, that produced only sour grapes, to the owner's bitter disappointment. Now Jesus told a similar story<sup>2</sup>, but with a trenchant difference. This time there was no problem with the vineyard itself, but with the tenants to whom the owner had let it out. They wouldn't give the landlord his agreed rent, a share of the crop. Whenever he sent servants to collect it they beat them up. Some of them they even killed. At last the owner, thinking that they would surely have greater respect for one of his own family, sent his son to them; but they reasoned that if they killed the son and heir, they themselves would get to keep the vineyard. They killed him and threw his body out of the vineyard. The owner realised that his only option was to come in force, destroy the villains and give the vineyard to more honest tenants.

It is of course, an outrageous and totally improbable story, but that is the point. In Isaiah's story, it is the vineyard, the unjust and corrupt nation of Israel, that is destroyed, but Jesus had shifted the focus of judgement from Israel as a whole to the leaders of Israel, to those who used and profited from the nation entrusted to them. Outrageous and improbable though it was, they had abused the very privileges given by God and now judgement was coming upon them. This powerful priesthood and the whole leadership that would receive the Messiah (the Son of God) only to kill him, would have to account to God for their misrule of Israel, and Israel would be given new rulers willing to keep faith with God.

The crisis was upon them, and upon Jesus and Jerusalem.

Jerusalem! City of God's house! In that glorious festival spring sunshine the temple stood proudly above the swelling throng of pilgrims. Columns that towered to beams of stone, lifting them like

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah ch. 5    <sup>2</sup> Mark 12: 1 - 10

children, for all their massive weight, up into the air; the height and the depth of space marked out in stone, its length and its breadth and its boundaries in pillars and colonnades and splendidly awesome gates that declared to the many: Only the chosen may go further. Courtyard within courtyard, to the innermost sanctuary of all, the very resting place of the presence of God.

Jesus' disciples marvelled at it all, the sheer size of it! Only the Romans themselves, and the most widely travelled merchants, would have seen architecture more wonderful than this. But when Jesus looked, he saw only the destruction to come. He saw only too clearly that his mission to change his people, to save Jerusalem, was failing, and that Jerusalem, the heart and the structure of his people's identity would be powerless to save itself in the coming storm. Judgement was coming on a nation, a social order, a religious hierarchy, a people, who were not ready for it. All John's efforts, and all his efforts, had not been able to prepare them.

Not one stone left standing on another. That wondrous structure would be brought down and everything destroyed. Jesus, whose whole mission had focussed on the present: the Now of God's kingdom, now glimpsed a wider future, a terrifying future in which the judgement of God and the universal proclamation of God's kingdom would be interwoven bewilderingly: wheat and weeds with a vengeance! There will be not one Messiah but a clamour of messiahs claiming "I am the one!" People will easily be deceived. There will be wars and reports of war, struggling and fighting, while nature itself breaks apart in earthquake and perishes in famine.

The disciples of Jesus will not be honoured but rejected, as he himself will be rejected. People will hand them over to their various authorities, to courts and inquisitions and military tribunals. And there they will witness to Jesus: not in the privacy of personal advice and with messages of individual comfort, but in all the publicity of a confrontation with kings and governors: standing up and speaking out before parliament and congress, before press and president and prime minister. For the good news, the news of God's rule among them, is to be proclaimed not only in Israel; it is to be proclaimed to all the nations!

There will be conflict and division in family and society, and in it all the disciples of Jesus will be hated and blamed by everyone. (It doesn't sound to me like a description of the Christian church.) They are to be witnesses. Not that they are to have their statements carefully prepared. No, there won't be time for that when they're dragged away in a dawn raid or plucked at random from a picket line, or taken by surprise at the interviewer's hostile question, or betrayed where they thought they were safely sheltered. But they are not to worry. They are God's witnesses, and God's Spirit will give them what they have to say.

Many will claim to be the Messiah, and loudly assert their claim, but they will bring no salvation. For Jerusalem itself, disaster awaits – terrible, panic-ridden disaster, a time to flee without stopping for even the fewest possessions. A ruthless time, without mercy for the vulnerable who depend most on others for their safety; a cruel time for pregnant women and for mothers nursing babies; a time that no one could survive, that no one would survive if God had not intervened to shorten it and to save those some he has chosen. A time of turmoil and fear. A time of breaking and destruction. And thru it all, thru the crashing darkness and noise and confusion there still will be those screeching and strident voices shouting: "Look, here is the Messiah", "This is the Messiah!" "For God, St George and England!" "For king and country!" "Truth, justice and the American way!" "Sieg, Heil!"

We are not to be led astray. For there will be any number of false prophets and false Christs. Jesus has given us, and will have given us, true knowledge of the Messiah. We must cling to that knowledge in faith, if we are not to be overwhelmed by a disaster of lies.

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And beyond Jerusalem, there is another ending that somehow piles up on top of this ending. An ending that will be written across the universe:

The sun will go dark and the moon will lose its light. The stars will tumble from the sky and the powers that rule the heavens will shudder and break. People will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds in power and glory. He will send the angels out to gather his chosen people from the four winds. They will come from the furthest ends of the world, from the furthest reach of the sky. (Mark 13: 24 – 27)

When Jesus speaks of the coming of the Son of Man, he is referring to an apocalyptic passage in the Book of Daniel:

I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven one who appeared as a Son of Man. He came to the One who was eternally old and was brought into his presence. Sovereignty and the glory of kingship were conferred upon him and people of every nation and language became his servants. (Daniel 7: 13 – 14)

This “Son of Man” sounds like the Messiah, but “Messiah” in the most awesome and glorious interpretation of that title. The figure more than human, yet like a son of man, appears in the very presence of God, and, designated by God, is made ruler over all the nations. But Jesus speaks of him in a context of cosmic upheaval and collapse of the natural order, that suggests ideas like the “end of the world” and the final judgement upon its history.

It’s as if Jesus is speaking of someone to come at the end of time, and yet, frequently, he had referred to himself as the “son of man”: when he forgave the sins of the paralytic and healed him, and when he claimed authority over the Sabbath<sup>1</sup>; and particularly when he referred to his death, to the betrayal and suffering in store for him at the hands of the Jerusalem authorities<sup>2</sup>. He had said, when his disciples were bidding for the top places in his kingdom,

“The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve.” (Mark 10:45)

as if he were denying that assertion of Daniel’s: “People of every nation became his servants.” And as for being ruler over all the nations, he had spoken then of giving his own life for “many”.

Jesus speaks of a day of judgement to come, but what kind of a day, and what kind of a judgement? He had been warning his disciples of an approaching crisis, but now it’s as if there are many crises: and what we would all call crises: wars, earthquakes, famines, are none of them the crisis Jesus speaks of. His suffering and death are to come, the terrible destruction of Jerusalem is to come, and the universe itself is to fall apart as the Son of Man comes in glory. But when is it all to happen? We look back from where we stand, with all the advantage of hindsight, and say: Jesus died a few days later; Jerusalem was destroyed forty years later; and the coming of the Son of Man amidst the ruin of the universe is still awaited, 2,000 years later.

Some of us trawl the apocalyptic writings, Daniel and Revelation especially, striving ingeniously – and fruitlessly – to break the code, to work out the details and to know how near the end is. We build a picture of the last days, drawing on the writings of Paul and others as if we have been given the program; and if we are particularly foolish we try to set a date. But God did not intend us to be watching the sun and the moon for signs of the end, or counting empires and wars to match some imagined tally. The descriptions we are given are neither a code nor a program, and Jesus said No

<sup>1</sup>Mark 2: 10, 28    <sup>2</sup>Mark 8: 31; 9: 12, 31; 10: 31

to every date. No one knows, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son of Man himself. However, Jesus said a remarkable thing to those who were then listening to him:

“This generation will not pass away before all these things have taken place.” (Mark 13:30)

His death, the destruction of Jerusalem and the overturning of the whole order of the world, the coming of the Son of Man, are to happen in the lifetime of people then living. Now we know that the end of the world has not come, so, unless he was mistaken, Jesus was not speaking about that. When the sap begins to flow in the fig tree and the twigs burst into leaf we know that the summer is coming. (Or as I was taught in kindergarden, “When the daffodils dance in the sun and the rain, then you know that the springtime is coming again.”) We are to watch the signs, but the signs will be there again and again and again, teaching us eternal vigilance. The crisis, the great coming, the overthrow of our world and its certainties will always be imminent, and will always be happening.

So be on the look-out. Stay awake! You never know when the time will come. (13:33)

How often has Jerusalem been destroyed! In 70 AD the Romans destroyed the temple, following an insurrection. Some 45 years later, after another rebellion, the whole city was overthrown and all its inhabitants expelled. It was turned into a Roman settlement forbidden to Jews. Centuries later, the city fell to more respectful conquerors and was ruled by Muslims until the Crusaders, vicious Christian armies, attacked and massacred Jews and Muslims alike and turned Jerusalem once again from a city of peace into a city of hatred. And now Jerusalem is the capital of an oppressive and aggressive Israeli state where the dispossessed find no way but to destroy themselves and their enemies together in suicide bombings. The signs do not go away, nor does the fulfilment of the signs.

Jesus spoke of coming destruction and judgement, not to satisfy our morbidity, or to have us waiting with grim satisfaction for the fulfilment of his prophecies. Much less that we might congratulate ourselves on being in the know and on the right side, while others fall under the blow. For him, there is only one purpose in thinking about the critical judgement ahead, and that is to get on with our work now. If we know it is coming, if we know that the new order and its beginning in judgement is imminent, then we have work to do at once, and we dare not be found neglecting it.

It's like a rich entrepreneur going abroad and leaving his business in the hands of his managers. He expects them to keep to the job. The business has to be up and running 24/7, with everyone performing to maximum in their role – because that's the way the business works. He might call in, or even return in person, at any hour of the day, night or early morning, because that's the way he works. And when he does, whenever he does, he expects to find his staff alert, on top of the job, and the business moving forward smoothly.

Jesus brings all thought of the future crisis back to the present, back to every present, which is our present, where we have to be at work, and found to be at work when the Son of Man comes. On his way into Jerusalem one morning (for he slept outside the city at his friends' house in Bethany) he had gone up to a fig tree to see if there was any fruit on it. A mad thing to do. You don't go looking for figs in spring – they need a whole summer to grow and ripen (as I well know, having sat in many a fig tree towards the end of a long Australian summer eating the sweet green sugar-figs, the very fruit of paradise!) Jesus was totally out of time. He was acting in the weird sort of way a prophet would carry on. When he had all the attention of his disciples, and probably of several astonished passers-by, he cursed the fig tree:

Let no one ever eat fruit from you again!

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There was to be nothing seasonal about being ready for the Son of Man and the judgement of God. It was to be in season, out of season, a readiness in every season. It will always be Now.

When Jesus and his friends passed that way going back to Bethany in the evening, they saw the fig tree, withered and dead.