

## 25 Signs of the Time

21: 5 - 38

Some people were admiring the temple – its fine stonework, impressively tall pillars lifting towards the sky as if stone had lost its weight; the beauty, the ornamentation, the cost of the offerings that endowed the temple, witnessing to the piety, need and boastfulness of generations. But Jesus said to them: “Everything you are looking at now will come crashing down in destruction. Not one stone will be left upon another.” So they asked him when it would happen, and what would give warning of it.

Jesus didn't want them to speculate about the timing. He warned them against too much eagerness to follow those who come forward with their own claims and their own readings of signs and dates. It's surprising that in spite of his warning, many Christians and sometimes whole sects have specialised in interpreting the signs and giving more or less final dates.

Many will come in my name, saying “I am he” and “The time has come.” Don't listen to them. (21: 8)

In fact, apart from being a warning not to think we can know, it's not very clear (to his hearers) what exactly Jesus is saying. Does he mean that people will come claiming to be him, or come in his name claiming to be someone else (the Messiah or the Son of Man perhaps)? And anyway, where will Jesus be when this happens? He is with them now. Is he going to be not with them then?

And Jesus also tells them that though they will hear of wars and uprisings, they are not to be alarmed. These things will happen, but they don't mean the end has come. There will indeed be people fighting against people and nations against nations; there will be terrible earthquakes, plagues and famine; there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven. But these things are not the end. Instead of watching wars and earthquakes and counting down to the final intervention of God, they need to be aware of what will be happening to them as history runs its course.

They will be arrested and persecuted, brought before the assemblies and put into prison. They will be hauled before kings and governors in his name, but that will turn out to be their opportunity to witness. I think of John Bunyan and George Fox and Cardinal Mindszenty, but there are many

throughout history – and all too few in our own day, when we have reached a more comfortable accommodation with the world around us.

“Be quite clear,” he said to them, “that you don’t have to plan your defence in advance. For I myself will give you words and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to answer or resist. You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, relations and friends, and some of you will be put to death. Everyone will hate you because of me, but not one hair of your heads will be lost. By your endurance, you will secure your lives.  
(21: 14 – 19)

For us who are hearing or reading the gospel, it’s clear enough: we know what is going to happen, and we know that Jesus’ is describing the time after his death and resurrection when Christians will be persecuted as they try follow him. But for those who were hearing him then, his disciples and some others in the temple, it can’t have been at all so clear. If Jesus himself was going to give them the words for their defence, was he going to be around to brief them regularly? Was this the same as he had said before: “The Holy Spirit will tell you what to say”?<sup>1</sup> How would it all come together with Jesus and the Holy Spirit and him being the Son of David, the rightful ruler in Jerusalem, or even the Messiah? It can’t have been clear, and we should not imagine that it was all one clear program even for Jesus. He did not go through these events with his head full of divine foreknowledge, but like any human being he was finding out as he went on.

He knew, and had long known, that he would lose in the struggle with Jerusalem, and that the authorities would succeed in killing him. He knew that he spoke with the authority of God, as God’s own Son, and that the Kingdom of God, the coming rule of God, was imminent, and that beyond death, he would rise again. It’s my belief that he probably thought of his resurrection in “Maccabean” terms, and with deep trust in God as his own Father, who would raise him up. The famous mother in the Second Book of Maccabees<sup>2</sup> had encouraged her sons, as they were tortured to death, with the conviction that God their Creator was closer to them as they were formed in her womb than she, their mother, had been. He would not lose them. And Jesus knew that God, his Father, would not lose him.

I think that he saw his own resurrection as the beginning of the great resurrection which the persecuted Jews had hoped for, but he also saw that there would still be the passage of time, that the disciples he had been

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12: 12

<sup>2</sup> Ch. 7

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training would continue his work, that the coming kingdom would still have its witnesses, as John and he had been, and that he himself would not cease to be involved with them. He saw that the struggle with Israel was not over and would not be simply superseded by his resurrection, that much still lay ahead before the coming of the Son of Man and the completion of all God's work.

And in that time disaster would come upon Jerusalem. Besieged by pitiless armies, shattered, destroyed, her people slaughtered or taken into slavery, it will be a time for those who can to flee the city and stay away. It will be a time of victory and triumph for the pagan nations. (In fact, the city was besieged and the temple destroyed some forty years later, after a failed revolt. Jesus did not need divine foreknowledge to foresee it, and the description he gave could be known from previous wars and sieges.) Jerusalem's refusal to welcome the kingdom of God would leave her without hope or help in the brutal world that would rule over them.

But the triumph of the pagans will not last forever. Amid cataclysmic events in the seas and in the skies, terrifying to those who have put their trust in the powers of the world, because they will find that all the powers are shaken to the foundations, the end will come. They will see the Son of Man coming in power and glory, for the work of God does have, will have, an end, an end in which they, his followers, may stand erect with heads held high, because it is their liberation that has come.

Altho he has warned them off any attempt to identify a time or a place, Jesus does describe the final act. It will be important for his followers to know that it is to be an action on their behalf, final deliverance when the Son of Man comes in power and glory. This time, the "Son of Man" is open to interpretation: Jesus himself, or another? I think that Jesus invoked the image from the Book of Daniel (perhaps already part of popular lore and "shifted" so that the Son of Man is seen as coming to the rescue of Israel) so that all his hearers would be encouraged, whether they understood the role of Jesus, or only the more general message of the kingdom of God.

The fig tree – or any tree, the oak, the cherry, the sycamore – can show us how it is. They all bud or blossom to tell us the Summer is near. As directly and surely as that, when we see these things happening, we can recognise the approach of the kingdom of God.

"I tell you most definitely," Jesus said to them, "this generation will not pass away before everything comes about. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“So look to yourselves; see that your minds are not numbed by self-indulgence and drink and the worries of life, so that the day is suddenly sprung on you like a trap; for it will break upon everyone all over the face of the earth. So be awake at all times and pray for the strength to survive all these trials and stand before the Son of Man.”

(21: 32 – 36)

This is the end of Jesus’ public teaching, his message to Israel given in the temple. He had been there each day, speaking to them, and each nite he would slip away to the Mount of Olives, outside the city. Then early in the morning the crowds would be gathering in the temple again to listen to him.

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It is an astonishing situation, when we let it sink in what is happening. Jesus had made an unmistakable entry into Jerusalem. In public, even with his determined critics to witness it, he had allowed his followers to acclaim him King, God’s appointed ruler for the city. Yet he had come without an army, without any plans to raise an army, without any demonstrable sources of power.

He had not gone to Herod’s former palace, or to confront the Roman governor, but had gone to the temple, the heart of the Israelite nation, and taken charge as if he carried a special authority there; for it was not the military power of Rome, nor the pretensions of the Herods, but the Temple leadership, which stood by the Law of God, that he would address as the leaders of God’s nation.

Yet he challenged them, as if his authority were altogether higher than theirs. He had driven off the traders, upsetting the practical and profitable way the temple was run. He was undermining their efforts to encourage money from the wealthy. And as in Galilee and everywhere else on his way to Jerusalem, he did not defer to Israel’s wealthiest and most respected leaders, or respect the order established by them.

He was popular with the people, who crowded to listen to him, but again and again his words punctured the authority of established leaders, who saw themselves as the ones to whom the people should be listening, the ones from whom they should learn how to obey the Law and be God’s nation of Israel. He was in their territory claiming their platform, and there was already a long history of disagreement about wealth, authority and

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acceptability, but he would not tell them, clearly, in terms acceptable to them, the basis of his authority.

Did he speak as King, or as Messiah, or even as the Son of Man? It was not clear, except that he challenged all authorities to see in his actions the authority of God, to learn from him as the merest street-loungers of Jerusalem were learning from him. Jesus was teaching in the temple: he showed no plans for other activity, for organising a protest, a revolt, a coup. He gave no advice on fighting, on collecting or preparing weapons, on securing the money that might be needed in a bid for power. He simply taught them, as he had taught the people in Galilee and in the towns and villages on his journey to Jerusalem, to recognise in the love and mercy, and the utter generosity of God, all the resources needed for the renewal of Israel and the establishment at last of God's kingdom.

As I said before, every revolution depends on teaching. You cannot bring in a new order until you have taught the people, or enough people to lead the others, what the new order is all about and how it works. But revolutions include in their teaching some thoughts about the path to power, some plans for seizing power when the time is opportune and enough people are ready to give it their support. Jesus, however, is teaching people to rely utterly on God, to be ready only and entirely in their response to God. The change that God is bringing upon them will be a change in the **very** way society changes, as they learn to live a kind of life and to be kind of society that springs from the rule of God. He offers no path to power.

When Jesus was teaching in Galilee he went from place to place, for "There are other towns too in which I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God."<sup>3</sup> And then he had journeyed to Jerusalem, teaching and healing along the way, because it was in Jerusalem that he must fulfil the role of a prophet.<sup>4</sup> But now, arrived in Jerusalem, he stays in the temple, teaching the people there. He has reached the goal of his journey. He has come to the place where he will complete what was begun in Galilee. There is nowhere else to go.

Now for all this we have our traditional, heretical (in the sense I have previously explained) interpretation. Jesus was preaching and teaching a kingdom not of this world, which we enter upon death if we have trusted and obeyed him. But that kingdom would not be open to us until he had died a sacrificial death to make atonement for all our sins. That death

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 4: 43

<sup>4</sup> Luke 13: 33

would be brought about by the religious leaders of Israel who would not accept his authority or teaching.

As I have said before, this interpretation is partly true; but it is not the truth which Luke's gospel is showing us, and it is not the truth which any of the gospels show us (alho there are the beginnings of such an interpretation in John's gospel <sup>5</sup>). Drawn originally from Paul's reflections on the death of Jesus, we have made it a truth which excludes other dimensions of the truth, and thereby becomes untruth. We must look again, and listen, and understand what Luke is telling us, see the events which are about to break upon Jesus and his followers, and upon us, for what they really are.

Jesus has come to Jerusalem to confront the authorities who govern his people, and by that he ment – God ment – the Israelite authorities, not the Romans or any Roman appointed king. He came to the temple as the very hub of government, as Israel sought to govern itself under the Law of God. It was, of course, a very different situation from any that we experience in current history, but if we want to get some idea of what was happening, we have to imagine, as I suggested before, a popular speaker and spreder of revolutionary ideas, highly critical in particular of a money-dominated economy and a power-dominated legal system, setting up on the lawn of the White House or in St Stephen's Hall,<sup>5</sup> and drawing crowds, day after day, to hear his prescriptions for a radical realignment of society, relationships and human life.

Our favorite interpretations of Jesus' death focus on the individual, the individual person, individual choice and faith, and individual souls to be saved. For some, any attention to government, society or politics is a distraction from the essentials of the "gospel". For others, it is worldliness and a failure of faith. For many, the message of faith and salvation only works at a private and individual level and has little to say to the public, the political, the behavior of cities and nations. And many, fearful of making a public challenge, are only too glad to keep it that way.

In each one of the gospels, but particularly in Luke's, we can see, if we open our eyes to it, that Jesus brings together the individual and the political in one whole gospel of the coming Rule of God. We see the compassion, the generous care, the deeply personal encounter of forgiveness, the insistence on behavior that comes from the heart and reaches out to the heart, but it is never a "religion" that can retreat into the privacy of individual relations. That openness, that forgiveness, that seeking for generosity and compassion

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<sup>5</sup> a more public part of the Houses of Parliament in Westminster

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under the rule of God was something that challenged the village meeting, upset its leaders, invited the involvement of the authorities and drew their hostile attention.

In the end, Jesus stands in the Temple in Jerusalem, still drawing and teaching the people, but seeking to re-cast the life and government of Israel. It's not that Jesus balances, or even reconciles, the individual and the social. They just are not separated. The heart that responds to God carries with it its whole society. The society that does not respond to God puts itself in conflict with God's children. The gospel is social, political, religious, relational, personal. It is human, in all the breadth of humanity. It is God reaching out in love to the people of Israel.

This is the good news that Jesus brings to Jerusalem and teaches in the temple: that the kingdom or rule of God is beginning and will soon be present in strength and glory. It is a message for the people; it is a message for the nation; it is a message for the Temple authorities and all the leaders of Israel.

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He had spoken to the people and had won their affection, sometimes their trust; and he had spoken to the wealthy and powerful but had made no progress with them. Where could he go from here? Where could they go from here? The future was not pre-ordained. It remained to come about, shaped by their choices, or by their putting into action the choices they had now made. It was not yet, and could not yet be spoken of as a mapped-out conclusion. But ordinary human intelligence, quite apart from any divine inspiration, could see what way things were going, what way, in particular, the power was moving. And a wise person could see what lay ahead for a society that missed its opportunity, that relied on such power play to secure its future.

At the end, Jesus tells them what should now be clear to the wise, and reaffirms some of their ancient expectations about the eventual triumph of God. But, at least in Luke's gospel, it all comes out in a jumble of predictions: about wars and upheavals that are not the end and cataclysmic events that are the end, about the destruction of Jerusalem, about the persecution and final vindication of Jesus' followers. And it is right they should be jumbled together, for at the time Jesus is speaking they have not been enacted and are still to come about in all the freedom and confusion and unpredictability of human history.

At the time Luke is writing some things have come about. The cataclysmic and decisive events of Jesus' death and resurrection have happened, and, closer to Luke's own time, the Temple has been destroyed by the Roman army. There has been the reaction of communities across the Roman Empire to Jesus' followers, and in many places they have been persecuted. But Luke is sticking close to the perspective of Jesus' time in the Temple, when things were not yet clear.

Only they will be clear, when the time comes – as clear as the budding of the fig tree at the approach of warmer weather. It won't be a mystery hidden in signs and figures for the clever to unravel, and those who search the scriptures, or any other writings, and come up with ingenious applications to people, places and events of subsequent history, or try to make predictions from the juxtaposition of texts, are wasting their time. For those who have their eyes open, it will be as clear and as simple as the budding of the fig tree.

In Galilee, and on his journey, Jesus had spoken clearly of his death and his resurrection to follow. But here in Jerusalem itself, he speaks publicly only of the more distant future, of a resolution still to be disentangled thru the passing of history. He has not come to provoke his own death, but to proclaim the coming rule of God in Jerusalem and in the heart of the Israelite nation. For the time being, he remains, teaching in the Temple day by day, slipping away by nite to the Mount of Olives and being in the Temple again in the morning, when the crowds come looking for him.